

# first

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local  
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## Health inequalities: closing the gap



### Young minds in crisis

Recommendations for improving  
children's mental health **p16**

### Unlocking the potential

AI can revolutionise local  
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### Employment support

Minister wants to transform  
job centres **p25**

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## Funding and fast-track

**The final funding** settlement for councils in England confirms additional money for the direct costs of increases in employer National Insurance contributions but falls short of what councils need to avert council tax rises and reductions in services (p5, p26).

The LGA continues to consult its members on the English Devolution White Paper and I have written to Local Government Minister Jim McMahon setting out where clarity is needed (p10).

As **first** was going to press, the Government announced postponements of local elections where councils have applied to fast-track their devolution proposals (p5). Please keep checking our devolution hub for the latest updates ([www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub](http://www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub))

In this edition, we also take a look at the LGA's policy lobbying priorities (p11), how councils are tackling health inequalities (p12), and our proposals for improving children's mental health (p16).

You can read about our recommendations for making apprenticeships work even better for councils (p14), and it's not too late to apply for top graduates via Impact, the LGA's flagship graduate programme, (email [impact@local.gov.uk](mailto:impact@local.gov.uk)) or for new planners via the Pathways to Planning scheme (p7).

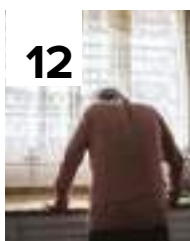
Our lead comment this month is from Employment Minister Alison McGovern on transforming job centres and localising employment support (p25). ●

**Councillor Louise Gittins**  
is LGA Chair

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# LGA calls for national strategy on health inequalities

**The Government** is being urged to introduce a national health inequalities strategy to tackle England's widening health gap, in a new report from the LGA.

The report, 'Building fairer towns, cities, and regions: insights from Marmot Places', was launched at the LGA's Smith Square Debate on 'Health inequalities – can councils close the gap?' earlier this month.

The call comes as councils continue to lead the way in tackling health inequalities at a local level.

The report features innovative case studies from 'Marmot Places' – areas that have endorsed the approach of the independent Marmot Review into health inequalities, which is grounded in addressing the social determinants of health, such as housing, employment and education.

With more than 50 such areas across England, Wales and Scotland, councils are already demonstrating how collaborative, community-focused initiatives can deliver meaningful change.

The report also underlines the need for national leadership to mirror and support local efforts, given the scale of health inequalities and previous studies warning of the widening health inequality gap.

For example, figures from the King's



Fund showed that, in 2020-22, healthy life expectancy in the North East was almost seven years shorter for males, and six years shorter for females, compared with the South East.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "The Marmot Places report is a powerful reminder of what local government and its partners can achieve when they commit to tackling health inequalities.

"Across the country, councils are working tirelessly to incorporate fairness into housing, employment and public

health initiatives, often in the face of significant challenges.

"But local action alone cannot close the widening health inequality gap.

"We urgently need a national health inequalities strategy that builds on the excellent progress councils have made.

"With national and local leadership working together, we can create a society where everyone, regardless of their background or postcode, has the opportunity to thrive." ●

● See p12

## SEND in state of emergency – MPs

**MPs have warned** that a 'lost generation' of children could leave school without having received the help they need, with the LGA calling for a plan for reform.

In a report on support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the Public Accounts Committee has urged the Government to take action to improve a system that is failing the families who

need it and putting almost half of all councils in England in danger of effective bankruptcy within 15 months.

It recommended that, within six months, the Department for Education should set out the provision that children with SEND should expect, how inclusive education will be achieved, and how schools will be held to account.

The committee also called on government to work with

councils to develop "a fair and appropriate solution" to the financial challenges they face supporting children with SEND.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "The Public Accounts Committee is right to describe the failing SEND system as an emergency, and its report reflects councils' long-standing concerns over the need for

more inclusive provision and for the immense financial pressures on councils to be adequately addressed.

"It is vital the Government urgently sets out a comprehensive reform plan that ensures children and their families get the support they need and deserve.

"This must include ensuring councils are on a financially stable footing, with high-needs deficits written off." ●

## Public health grant increased

**The Government has** announced an increase in the public health grant for English councils in 2025/26, to £3.858 billion – a cash uplift of 5.4 per cent, or nearly £200 million, and a real-term increase of 3 per cent.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "We are pleased the Government has increased the public health grant for councils, acting on our concerns over the significant funding pressures public health teams have been under to maintain vital services, such as sexual health services, smoking cessation programmes and drug treatment.

"It is important this marks a reset that sees government work in partnership with councils.

"Investing in public health is key to bridging the health inequality gap, improving population health and preventing ill-health, reducing the pressure on social care and the NHS.

"We are calling on the Government, in the Spending Review, to set out a long-term sustainable funding plan for public health, which will give councils the certainty they need to plan services." ●

● See p12



## Funding for NICs confirmed

**Overall funding for** local government in England will increase by 6.8 per cent in cash terms compared with 2024/25, according to the final finance settlement, published earlier this month.

The Government also confirmed that councils will receive extra money to manage the cost of increases to employer National Insurance contributions, while six councils will be allowed to increase council tax above current referendum limits.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "Extra money for councils in 2025/26, including compensation for employer National Insurance increases, will help meet some of the cost and demand pressures they face, but still falls short of what is needed to cover them all.

"This financial year remains extremely challenging for councils of all types, which now face having to increase council tax bills to bring in desperately needed funding, yet could still be forced to make further cuts to services.

"Councils also recognise that having to increase council tax places yet more financial burden on households. We remain clear to the Government that it is not the answer to meeting the long-term pressures facing high-demand national services.

"The Spending Review will be critical to the future of our local services and must include significant and sustained increases in overall funding for councils." ●

● See p26

## Government announces priority devolution deals

**Elections to eight** English councils, due to take place this May, will be postponed until 2026 to help pave the way for six new devolution deals.

Proposals for new combined county authorities – in Cumbria, Cheshire and Warrington, Greater Essex, Hampshire and Solent, Norfolk and Suffolk, and Sussex and Brighton – have been accepted onto the Government's fast-track Devolution Priority Programme (DPP), with inaugural mayoral elections due next year.

County elections in Surrey have also been

delayed, to "help speed up reorganisation".

Additionally, the Government has formally written to all councils in two-tier areas and neighbouring small unitaries, inviting proposals for reorganisation.

LGA Chair Cllr Louise Gittins said the fast-track and election announcements would remove uncertainty, but the tight deadline for submitting detailed proposals will be "challenging" and unsuccessful DPP applicants will be "disappointed".

The LGA is working with government and partner organisations to develop its

devolution support offer for all councils.

Cllr Gittins added: "We continue to press government to provide further clarity on aspects of the reforms and timelines for devolution and local government reorganisation, including for those whose bids have not been approved as part of this initial priority programme.

"Government also needs to commit to funding councils up front to deliver on these reforms. It is imperative that any new unitary councils are financially viable, and able to provide sustainable services in the long term." ●

● See p10

## Violence against women 'significant and growing'

Violence against women and girls remains a "significant and growing problem", affecting one in 12 women in England and Wales and causing significant physical, mental, social and financial harm to survivors.

So says a new report by the National Audit Office, which also found that Home Office efforts to address the issue have not yet improved outcomes for victims.

Cllr Heather Kidd, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: "Any instance of violence against women and girls [VAWG] is shocking, saddening and unacceptable.

"It is good that the majority of commitments made in the previous government's VAWG strategy and domestic abuse plan have been met, but there is still much progress needed in tackling the issue.

"Local government has a key role to play in preventing VAWG and responding to it. Councils work hard to provide the support and safety needed by people who face this threat and want to work with government to improve outcomes for victims and survivors.

"However, long-term funding challenges continue to negatively impact on councils' ability to provide the essential services that make women and girls feel safe, empowered and confident about their futures."

Every council has to complete a domestic abuse strategy. Councils provide a wide variety of support for victims and survivors including safe accommodation, specialist support services, and social care. ●

## Right to Buy reforms 'should go further'

The Government should go further with reforming Right to Buy to give local authorities more flexibility and control over how the scheme operates locally, the LGA has said.

In its submission to a consultation on reforming Right to Buy (RTB), which closed last month, the LGA recognised that the Government's reform proposals have taken on board councils' key concerns.

However, to best serve their local housing markets and residents' needs, local authorities need additional powers – including to set the discount rate, exempt newly built properties in perpetuity, protect their investment in retrofitting or improving their existing stock, and retain RTB receipts indefinitely.

The LGA has also called for the Government to undertake research on how many applications were made by tenants to buy their council houses last October-November, after it was announced in the Autumn Budget that RTB discounts would reduce.

Some councils reported receiving more applications in that three-week period than over the course of a typical year, resulting in significant resourcing



challenges in meeting statutory timescales for accepting applications.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "We are pleased with the steps the Government has taken so far, but we urge further reform to ensure local authorities can properly manage the RTB scheme and address the chronic shortage of social housing.

"It is crucial that local authorities are given the power to shape the scheme to fit the needs of their communities." ●

● See [www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses](http://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses) for the LGA's full response to the Right to Buy consultation

## 'Unsustainable' pressure from homelessness

**Record homelessness levels** are placing unsustainable pressure on local authorities, the Commons' Public Accounts Committee has warned.

In 2023/24, councils spent £2.1 billion on temporary accommodation, diverting funds from much-needed preventative measures, the committee found. Despite similar strategies in devolved nations, England lacks a national homelessness plan, worsening the crisis.

The report highlights that

6,000 families with children are living in B&Bs, with 39,000 households placed outside their local areas, disrupting lives.

The shortage of affordable housing, rising local housing allowance shortfalls, and poor oversight of the rental sector are key drivers of the crisis.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "Homelessness is one of the biggest and most urgent pressures facing local government.

"As this report highlights,

as more people turn to their council for support, and councils have little choice but to resort to costly temporary accommodation, local authorities are spending less on funding homelessness prevention.

"There also needs to be a genuine cross-departmental approach to tackling this crisis, as part of a long-term government strategy, with councils given the powers and resources needed to address the national shortage of affordable housing." ●

## Ofsted proposes fairer education inspections

**Ofsted has announced** proposals for fairer education inspections and new, more detailed report cards.

The proposed report cards are aimed at giving parents detailed information about standards across more areas of practice in their child's school, early years or further education provider.

The changes would replace the 'single-word judgement' with a new five-point grading scale for each evaluation area. There will also be increased focus on support for disadvantaged

and vulnerable children and learners, including those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "The continued use of a single-word judgement and how this can accurately reflect the complexities of the child-protection system has previously raised concerns. We are pleased Ofsted has acted on our calls for a much greater focus on inclusion, and on whether a setting is playing a meaningful role in supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

"We would also like to see this important work informed by the adoption of a nationally agreed definition of mainstream inclusion." ●

## 'Trillion-pound' cost of children's mental health

**New research has** warned the mental health crisis facing children and young people will prevent the Government from boosting economic growth, as well as having an impact on the lives of thousands of young people.

The research, from the Future Minds Campaign, estimates the long-term impact of mental health problems in childhood now costs the UK more than £1 trillion in lifetime lost earnings.

The campaign, which brings together Centre for Mental Health, Centre for Young Lives, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, and YoungMinds, with the support of the Prudence Trust, is urging the Government to deliver urgent reform and investment in children's mental health services in the upcoming Spending Review and 10 Year NHS Plan.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "The growing children's mental health crisis needs to be recognised as an urgent social concern and tackled with a cross-government plan to support children and young people.

"In addition to adequately funding children's services in the upcoming



Spending Review, councils have set out a series of steps the Government should take. These include reviewing mental health support teams in schools, with a named mental health professional supporting each school.

"Councils should be supported to provide parenting support programmes and to set up local networks for parents and carers of children with mental health needs. We would also like to see mental health training become a core element of training for all staff that support children and young people." ●

● See p16

### News in brief

#### Pathways to planning

Councils can sign up to hire planners to start work in September 2025, via the LGA's 'Pathways to Planning' graduate scheme. This provides marketing and recruitment services, and a bursary of at least £5,000 to enable graduates' postgraduate study. There are no fees for councils, but they must pay each graduate a minimum salary of £24,000. The scheme intends to provide a number of bursaries, allocated on a competitive basis, to cover all or part of a graduate planner's salary. See [www.local.gov.uk/pathways-planning-council-info](http://www.local.gov.uk/pathways-planning-council-info)

#### Funding for UAS children

The Home Office has ended key funding incentives for councils receiving unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children through the National Transfer Scheme. An LGA spokesperson said: "Councils have reported for some years that the cost of supporting UAS children and care leavers exceeds the funding they receive. This decision will clearly further limit councils' ability to provide much-needed care and support for these young people. Government must use the forthcoming Spending Review to fully fund care and support for UAS children and care leavers."

#### Local growth

National economic growth can only be achieved if every local economy is firing on all cylinders, the LGA has said in response to the Chancellor's speech pledging to 'kick-start economic growth'. Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "Councils have a unique role in delivering local growth across all sectors and communities, and are already working with businesses, supporting jobseekers, planning regeneration, and improving infrastructure. Government investment is therefore key to supporting long-term, sustainable, inclusive economic growth that brings increased prosperity to every part of the country."

## LGA: 'Invest in local digital transformation'

The LGA has reiterated its call for a Local Government Centre for Digital Technology, in response to announcements on digital services and artificial intelligence (AI).

In January, the Government published plans to overhaul digital services and target £45 billion in productivity savings every year.

Its 'Blueprint for a modern digital government' will look at how public sector organisations, including councils, can negotiate contracts together to save money, and open opportunities to drive economic growth and create jobs.

Separately, the Prime Minister has set out how AI can boost growth, increase living standards and drive change, including in planning and reducing administration in the private and public sectors.

The 'AI Opportunities Action Plan' will also see the introduction of dedicated AI growth zones to speed up planning permission for AI infrastructure.

Cllr Abi Brown OBE, Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, said: "To truly unlock the potential of a digitally-enabled public sector, central government must... empower councils on their digital journey.

"By targeting investment through a local government context, the Local Government Centre for Digital Technology can support councils to meet local needs while contributing to national priorities, including the adoption of AI, bridging the digital divide, and developing new solutions to some of the biggest challenges facing our communities." ●

● See p22



## Soaring demand for health visitors – survey

A survey by the Institute of Health Visiting has found an increase in complex needs among families, alongside a severe shortage of health visitors and significant disparities in service provision.

The survey revealed that 84 per cent of practitioners reported demand for health visiting support had increased over the past 12 months. At the same time, the workforce has not kept pace with the increasing needs, and practitioners reported a decrease in health visitor numbers.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "The findings highlight the pressing

need for long-term investment in health visiting services, to address stark disparities and deliver high-quality, personalised care for families.

"Health visitors are a safety-critical workforce, essential to improving children's health and development.

"Committing to an ambitious plan to increase the number of health visitors, and resourcing these services properly, will ensure that all families can access support, reducing pressures on the NHS and improving outcomes for children and families.

"Failing to act is a false economy." ●

## The power of local

The LGA has issued a call-out to councils for examples of where local approaches to key national policy issues have proved successful – and centralised approaches have fallen short.

The aim is to build up an evidence base to support a 'Power of Local' approach to delivering change.

The LGA has long advocated for local solutions to national problems by working with councils to empower local government. The 'Power of Local' approach argues that local government is essential to the delivery of national goals.

An LGA spokesperson said: "We want to build an evidence base to showcase the notion that local knowledge creates better outcomes by highlighting the effectiveness of locally-led initiatives. We want to shift the default narrative about how to deliver change.

"Together with our partners, Open Innovations, a not-for-profit, independent data innovation company, we are working to create examples of how a locally-led approach ensures a greater pace of positive change and better value for public money. We will provide evidence that local delivery is essential through stories and case studies that will be shared in the open."

Councils can find out more about the 'Power of Local' at [www.open-innovations.org/projects/lga/power-of-local](http://www.open-innovations.org/projects/lga/power-of-local), where they can share their examples of successful local delivery – as well as those where centralised approaches have fallen short – by filling in a simple form, which should take less than five minutes to complete.

Open Innovations is also keen to carry out brief interviews with interested participants – please email [hello@open-innovations.org](mailto:hello@open-innovations.org) to discuss further. ●

# Education reforms

## Ensuring safe and high-quality schooling for all children

**T**he Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill introduces significant reforms to England's education system, aiming to improve school accountability and oversight of home education.

Key measures include replacing single-word Ofsted inspection ratings with report cards, requiring all state-funded schools to follow the national curriculum, standardising teacher pay across maintained schools and academies, and giving councils new powers to register and visit home-educated children.

The LGA welcomes the introduction of the bill, which aligns with our long-standing calls for greater oversight in key areas such as school admissions and elective home education.

Strengthening councils' ability to ensure every child receives a suitable education is a positive step forward. However, the successful implementation of these measures will depend on adequate funding. Councils will need sufficient resources to fulfil new responsibilities, particularly in visiting home-educated children and managing school-place planning effectively.

Similarly, while standardising teacher pay across different school types could support recruitment and retention for maintained schools, it must be funded properly to avoid placing additional financial strain on schools.

Despite the Labour manifesto pledge to do so, the bill does not include provisions for Ofsted to inspect multi-academy trusts (MATs). The LGA has long called for this oversight to ensure accountability across the whole education system.

Without these inspection powers, there is a risk that systemic issues within MATs may go unaddressed, undermining efforts to create a more equitable system.

Ruth Stanier, the LGA's Assistant Director of Policy – People, gave evidence



to the bill's committee in January, setting out the LGA's views on key aspects of the legislation. She emphasised the need for councils to have stronger oversight of home education and a greater role in planning school places.

She also highlighted the challenges facing local authorities in delivering children's services amid rising demand and financial pressures.

There was cross-party recognition of the importance of improving oversight of children not in school, though MPs debated how best to balance this with parental rights.

Separately, Cllr Bev Craig, Vice-Chair of the LGA, gave evidence to the Commons' Education Committee, where discussions centred on the proposed 'children not in schools' register.

Clare Canning, Head of Centre at Broadleaf Home Ed Co-operative, spoke against the register, arguing it infringes on parental rights and that parents are best placed to educate their children. While

the LGA does not dispute that the vast majority of parents provide an excellent education, councils must have visibility over all children to ensure those who are not in school are safe and receiving a sufficient education.

Recent cases have tragically demonstrated the consequences of a system lacking proper oversight, reinforcing the urgent need for reform.

As the bill moves forward, the LGA will continue to engage with Parliament to ensure councils' voices are heard.

We will push for Ofsted to have greater inspection powers over MATs, advocate for additional funding for councils' new responsibilities, work with the Department for Education to ensure new regulations are practical, and continue to brief MPs and peers ahead of key debates.

Councils play a vital role in ensuring all children receive a high-quality education, and we remain committed to securing a system that delivers for pupils, families and communities. ●

# The best devo deal for communities

The LGA continues to represent all councils in talks on reforms



Councillor Louise Gittins  
is Chair of the LGA

**A**s **first** readers will know, the LGA has been consulting closely with its membership since the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December.

As I told MPs when giving evidence on the reforms in late January, our regular engagement with councils across all regions has highlighted to us that uncertainty around the proposals has led to an information vacuum that is being filled by speculation.

That is why, last month, I also signed a cross-party LGA letter to Local Government Minister Jim McMahon, setting out where clarity is needed on a range of issues, including legislative schedules, timelines for devolution and reorganisation, election postponements, and criteria for establishing mayoral strategic authorities. As **first** was going to press, there was some clarity on some of these issues, with confirmation that elections due this May will be delayed in six areas now on a fast-track to setting up combined county authorities, with mayoral elections in 2026.

In our letter to the minister, we also highlighted that councils continue to ask for further information on how the 500,000-population benchmark for local government reorganisation was reached, and for clarity on the Government's flexibility around this number.

The latest ministerial statement reiterated that new unitary councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more, but that "there may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal".

It is also important to understand how councils will be funded, up front, to deliver on reorganisation. Areas that have already gone through this process relied heavily on reserves to unitarise and some estimations for one-off costs range from £25 million to £100 million.

My letter spelled out that, because of the significant financial constraints councils are facing, many areas do not have strong reserves and others are in worse financial positions.

It is also important to consider how debt will be managed, to ensure new unitary councils are financially viable.

We know there is real concern among our members over the impact of these reforms on existing day-to-day council services. We warned the minister that the focus on structural change could result in limited capacity to deliver on key areas, such as special educational needs and disabilities, social care, housing and adoption of digital technologies, where real savings and growth can be achieved.

We also advised him of the importance of providing clarity on which powers belong at a local and strategic level,



and how strategic authorities will work with local authorities to co-design and co-deliver services.

From our early analysis, there appears to be a transfer of some powers from local authorities to strategic authorities, such as on transport, local skills improvement plans, and strategic direction of affordable housing programmes.

We are also working with councils that want to use this opportunity to further understand the potential the white paper offers to unpack integrated budgets and additional powers.

The LGA believes that devolution is key to unlocking the further potential of local government. We are determined to ensure we capture and reflect all our members' views with government, to get the best deal for them and the communities they represent. ●

**i** For the latest updates from the LGA on devolution and local government reorganisation, please visit our hub at [www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub](http://www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub)

# A more equal partnership

## Maximising the impact of the LGA's policy lobbying



Eve Roodhouse is the LGA's Director of Strategy and Policy

**A**s 2025 gets under way, powerful lobbying on the issues that matter most to local government is more important than ever.

The LGA's top priority is driving home the case for sufficient resourcing and investment ahead of the Spending Review in June.

As well as submitting strong evidence to the review and campaigning throughout the coming months, we are holding a series of direct discussions with the Treasury on children's services, adult social care, and homelessness.

We are working intensively on the implications of the English Devolution White Paper, to advocate for the sector, and plan for future meetings of the Leaders' Council with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

We are also working with the Cabinet Office on the public service reform agenda, supporting it in the design of the 'Test, Learn and Grow' programme.

The Government's upcoming public service reform framework will be anchored in continuous improvement and innovation. Instead of top-down reforms, public service reforms will be designed locally – where services meet citizens and involving local places through local councils.

This is also a crucial year for health reforms. We are strongly represented on the working groups for the new 10-year health plan and in regular discussion with government on key issues, including neighbourhood health services.

We continue to lobby for urgent action on funding and reform of adult social care,

and are linking with the new Casey Commission team as it is set up.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes long-standing LGA asks, such as tackling profiteering in children's placements and promoting inclusion in schools.

We are working closely with the Department for Education on implementation and resourcing plans, and the urgent need for action on the special educational needs and disabilities crisis.

We continue to work with MHCLG on practical solutions to housing and homelessness pressures, and to advocate on planning reform.

We are having quarterly ministerial meetings with the Home Office and MHCLG to address concerns about asylum and resettlement, as

well as regular engagement on cohesion following last summer's unrest.

We are championing local government interests on a range of other important matters, too, including net zero, economic growth, transport, waste, building safety, fire services, local democracy, welfare benefits, and the UK Covid-19 Inquiry.

At the LGA, we started this critical year by bringing together our policy teams, external communications teams, research analysts, technology experts and project management professionals into a new directorate, to focus on lobbying for urgent change with maximum impact on behalf of our members.

I am proud to lead this team as Director of Strategy and Policy. We want to work closely with councils and partners in all regions so that our policy lobbying has maximum impact.

We will be setting up a new policy network for LGA policy teams and council policy officers, to share the latest updates from discussions with Whitehall and hear the latest perspectives from different places. We are also working to strengthen relationships with mayoral and combined authorities.

We are very grateful to the many councillors and officers who contribute so brilliantly to the LGA's policy boards and discussions with central government. There has been a marked shift in tone over recent months towards a more equal partnership, with voices from councils having real influence. ●

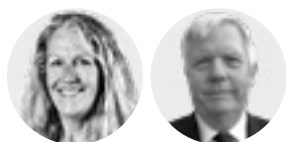
**"This is a crucial year for health reforms and we are in regular discussion with government on key issues"**



See [www.local.gov.uk/topics](http://www.local.gov.uk/topics) for more on the LGA's policy work

# Marmot places

## Councils are leading transformative work on health inequalities



Cllr Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA and Cllr David Fothergill is Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board

**T**he publication of the groundbreaking 2010 Marmot Review and its follow-up 10 years later have been key to shaping our understanding of the social and economic costs of health inequalities.

These landmark reviews not only highlighted the urgency of addressing these disparities, but also provided a robust and well-evidenced business case for concerted national and

local action. They continue to serve as a blueprint for creating a fairer society and improving health outcomes for our communities.

The Marmot approach, grounded in the social determinants of health, offers a powerful framework for tackling the root causes of health inequalities. It is not just about delivering better health outcomes, but about creating equitable communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

A newly published LGA report highlights the innovative and collaborative work of councils and their partners, who have embraced the Marmot principles and turned them into meaningful action. From leading the way with new initiatives in

housing and employment to embedding health equity across policies and practice, the case studies in 'Building fairer towns, cities, and regions: insights from Marmot Places' showcase the determination of local government to adapt and innovate, despite funding pressures and lasting impacts from the pandemic.

This work cannot stop here, however. The progress achieved so far must inspire ongoing commitment, both locally and nationally.

Addressing health inequalities requires sustained effort, robust partnerships, and an unwavering resolve to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

That is why we believe this report must also serve as a call to action for a new national health inequalities strategy (see p4). National leadership is vital to match the local ambition we see in these case studies.

By working together across sectors, regions and all levels of government, we can build on the progress already made and move closer to a more equitable society, where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. ●

**i** 'Building fairer towns, cities and regions: insights from Marmot Places' can be read in full at [www.local.gov.uk/publications](http://www.local.gov.uk/publications)

**"It is not just about delivering better health outcomes, but about creating equitable communities"**



### Case study

#### Coventry: the first Marmot City

Coventry became the first Marmot City in 2013, partnering with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to tackle health inequalities.

Over the past 11 years, despite reduced local government funding, the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis, Coventry has maintained its commitment to health equity. It has embedded Marmot principles across council policies, ensuring that transport, housing and employment support initiatives consider their impact on health equity.

A cornerstone of Coventry's Marmot approach is its 'Job Shop', a high-street hub offering employment advice and training, which supports around 170 residents daily. This service caters for diverse needs, from basic job searches to tailored support for ex-offenders.

After the pandemic, the city reinvigorated its Marmot work, fostering collaborations with 30 partners. Successes include reducing the proportion of Coventry's neighbourhoods in England's most deprived 10 per cent from 18.5 per cent to 14.4 per cent (2015 to 2019), and maintaining stable life-expectancy inequalities, even as national disparities widened.

In 2023, Coventry's Marmot Monitoring Tool was launched to align city-wide efforts with emerging challenges, ensuring a system-wide response to health inequities.



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

# Lacking democratic accountability

The LGA Independent Group's annual conference discussed devolution

**A**s in many councils, the 'day job' at the LGA is preoccupied with the proposals for local government reorganisation in the English Devolution White Paper – currently being branded as 'devolution', but not to our councils.

Our LGA Independent Group conference last month was fully booked, and the debate on the white paper was the hottest we have had in a long time.

Our members succinctly and powerfully raised concerns about the scale and pace of the Government's proposals. Many felt the lack of consultation and proper engagement with members of all groups and the public demonstrated the very point – a lack of democratic accountability – that could be an indication of things to come.

Our members who have moved from districts to larger unitaries explained how challenging they found keeping the connection with residents over large areas, making it difficult to represent their residents properly. Many found the increase in time commitment difficult, alongside earning a living to keep a roof over their heads. That makes it harder to get diverse representation or younger people from all walks of life, and harder to be seen as credible local voices.

We know that Independents and smaller parties can better reflect local views because they do not have to follow the position and dictates of a big national party. I fear this reorganisation and pulling up of powers will mean a dramatic loss of ability for local people to get their voice heard.

There is no reason why existing councils couldn't work together to be more

**"Councils are not just an efficient delivery mechanism for central government"**



efficient and create real devolution by handing down power, rather than creating new structures that are convenient for central government.

In many areas, we have already made these savings, but kept our local identity of place and our accountability.

We have looked closely at powers in the white paper, and it is clear this is centralising power – not dispersing it to the most appropriate local level.

Councils are not just an efficient delivery mechanism for central government. We are democratic organisations that listens to people and changes the services to match what local people want and need.

At the conference, we also hosted sessions on climate change, children's services and councillor standards, as well as hearing about the support available to all our members from our excellent LGA regional lead peers.

We had 86 nominations for the Independent Group's Clarence Barrett Award, jointly won by Councillors Kevin Etheridge, of Caerphilly Council, and Hannah Dalton, of Epsom and Ewell Council. Commendations and citations followed, in a heartwarming presentation, for the huge amount of work achieved by our councillors for their residents and, through the LGA, for their country.

Our Be a Councillor and regional events are in full swing – weekly, online with the Independent Network, and regionally in Cornwall and Newcastle so far, and in Lincoln this month. It's always heartening to meet and hear the enthusiasm from prospective councillors, keen to make a difference and represent their local communities. With local government reorganisation, we need to up our game to win these larger seats. ●

● See p26, p31, and [www.local.gov.uk/political/lga-independent-group](http://www.local.gov.uk/political/lga-independent-group)

# Apprenticeships key to recruitment crisis

The right changes could help councils 'grow their own' workforce



Councillor Pete Marland is Chair of the LGA's Economy and Resources Board

**L**ocal government is in the grip of a capacity crisis. Although our sector remains among the most challenging, life-changing and varied in which to work – where else could you find 800 different professions working side by side, from aardvark wranglers to zip testers, and everything else in between? – we have an ageing, and shrinking, workforce, down 40 per cent in a decade.

We have an increased demand for services, from social care to homelessness prevention, compounded by a recruitment and retention crisis that only seems to get worse.

This perfect storm has been building for years, and has left councils overburdened, underfunded and increasingly understaffed.

LGA research shows that 94 per cent of councils face recruitment and retention difficulties. More than half say they don't have enough staff to run all services normally, while a similar proportion of council leaders say that workforce capacity issues will affect their ability to deliver services in the coming months and years.

We remain the lowest-paying part of the public sector, with other employers, from local hospitals to supermarkets, able to outbid us for talent.

Tackling the financial issues in the sector will take time, but we also know that pay, while it is a major obstacle in many areas, is not the only issue; there just aren't enough qualified people in many specialist professions.

So, we need to do more to boost the supply of qualified staff coming into – and staying in – our sector and attract more young people.

There's no silver bullet to this, but the weapons we do have in our arsenal are apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships offer us a way of 'growing our own', upskilling existing staff, and adding development opportunities to our retention offer. Encouragingly, 78 per cent of councils say they are looking to increase apprenticeship numbers to tackle their skills needs.

We know that local government's record in this space is a good one. Since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in 2017, councils and our maintained schools have worked diligently to create more than 100,000 apprenticeship starts in our sector, and fund thousands more in our supply chains and

with local businesses through use of levy transfers.

We now create more than double the number of apprenticeship starts, on average, each year (13,800) than we did before the levy's introduction (6,000).

With more than 225 apprenticeship standards mapping across one or more of our 800-plus job roles, there are significant opportunities to use these qualifications to develop the skills we need. Yet we also know that the system as it currently operates is holding councils back.

Apprenticeship starts in our sector have flatlined for three years running and have failed to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Barely half of the £1 billion councils have paid into the levy has been spent, with around £200 million in unused funds reclaimed by central government after hitting the 24-month expiry limit.

This is funding, drawn from councils' own budgets, that is ultimately being used to pay for apprenticeships in other sectors, at a time when that investment is badly needed for our own workforce.

Councils are working hard to spend more and more of the levy each year, but are hamstrung by a system that is too restrictive.

With the right changes,





## “Councils are working hard to spend more of the levy, but are hamstrung by a system that is too restrictive”

local government could do so much more to tackle our capacity crisis and boost local economic growth.

Reform of the levy has been limited, with only the increase in the levy transfer limit (now up to 50 per cent of an employer's annual contributions) and a workaround to end the injustice that saw voluntary-aided and faith schools unable to access apprenticeship funding simply because councils ran their payroll being enacted in the past few years.

Both changes were lobbied for extensively by the LGA and were helpful, but with more ambitious reform, councils can be released from the shackles and use apprenticeships much more effectively.

Any reform should include a bespoke approach to tackle the unique needs of the

local government workforce.

Government should consider allowing councils to retain all levy funds generated by the sector, ending the effective top-slice and ensuring every penny is reinvested in tackling our workforce challenges.

It should also look at allowing a small proportion of levy funds to be used to pay for apprenticeship-related activity, to help unlock more starts; if 10 per cent of our levy funds could be used flexibly for administration costs, pre-apprenticeship training, resits, backfill costs or salary subsidy, we could reduce dropout rates and unlock thousands more starts.

Government also needs to: maintain access to Level 7 apprenticeship standards in key skills-shortage areas such as planning, legal and finance; develop a list of non-

apprenticeship qualifications eligible for funding that would support skills development in the sector, such as digital or leadership; and ensure a replacement for the discontinued Level 2 Business Administration apprenticeship is in place, to help recruit more young people into the sector.

Some of the early moves by the new Government could provide fresh opportunities.

Transforming the Apprenticeship Levy into a new Growth and Skills Levy that gives employers some flexibility to use funds on non-apprenticeship training is positive. The creation of Foundation Apprenticeships will allow employers to use levy funds on pre-apprenticeship training for the first time; and with significant involvement

from local government in its development, a replacement for the Level 2 Business Administration Apprenticeship now looks to be on the way in the autumn.

Alongside the Deputy Prime Minister's creation of a new Local Government Workforce Development Group, there are positive signs of the Government's commitment to engage with us on these critical issues.

As ever, the devil will be in the detail, but I look forward to working closely with government to ensure the badly needed reforms of the skills system, including to the Apprenticeship Levy, work effectively, recognise the particular challenges councils face, and help us develop the workforce we need to deliver for our communities. ●

**i** National Apprenticeship Week took place this month from 10-16 February, see [nationalapprenticeshipweek.co.uk](http://nationalapprenticeshipweek.co.uk). The LGA's virtual Local Government Apprentice of the Year event takes place from 20-21 May – see [www.local.gov.uk/AOTY](http://www.local.gov.uk/AOTY) to find out more and book your place by 29 April



# Young minds in crisis

New recommendations for improving children's mental health



**Councillor Jon Hubbard is Chair of the LGA's Children's Mental Health Task and Finish Group**

**B**ack in October 2023, the LGA's Children and Young People Board agreed to establish a cross-party task and finish group to consider improving support for children's mental health and wellbeing.

Children and young people's declining mental health is well documented and

has been highlighted in numerous LGA reports, including the suite of resources available on our website (see [local.gov.uk/children-and-young-peoples-mental-health](https://www.local.gov.uk/children-and-young-peoples-mental-health)).

Hospital admissions for self-harming have more than doubled, referrals to children's and young people's mental

## “We want to see ‘whole education’ approaches to mental health and wellbeing embedded across all education settings”

health services have gone up 84 per cent, and there was a 53 per cent rise in children presenting to councils with mental health needs in 2022 compared with 2018.

The task and finish group considered a range of evidence as part of its discussions, including the policy landscape, statistics, and a literature review of the evidence of impacts on children and young people’s mental health.

Using existing channels, officers and members approached local areas to consider good practice and understand what works. This included gathering case studies from Brighton and Hove, St Neots, Manchester, North Tyneside, Gloucestershire, and Sutton.

The group also had speakers from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy to discuss counselling in schools, and the Office of the Children’s Commissioner to discuss social media and technology and its impact on children and young people.

The LGA already has well-established recommendations on mental health, which include its calls for a cross-Whitehall strategy for children and young people; expansion of mental health support teams in schools; building mentally healthy schools; and addressing the root causes of poor mental health through tackling poverty and investing in prevention.

Based on the various discussions that have taken place, the task and finish group has concluded that children’s mental health is a crisis – and deserves to be treated as such by central government – and has made additional recommendations for improvements.

These include a call for a fundamental review of NHS mental health services – in particular, child and adolescent mental health services. The recent Darzi report on the NHS reflected just how little focus is paid to children’s mental health on a national level, and how funding and interventions have therefore suffered.

### Case study

#### ‘Restorative practice’ in Gloucestershire

In 2016, Gloucestershire’s schools were the fourth highest for the number of exclusions across the country. The council implemented ‘restorative practice’ pilots across children’s services and extended this to two schools.

The secondary school involved reduced its suspensions by 54 per cent in the first year and increased overall attendance by 1.3 per cent, while the primary school reduced suspensions by 82 per cent and increased overall attendance by 1.5 per cent.

In 2017, the impact of ‘adverse childhood experiences’ (ACEs) was brought into the restorative practice programme and resulted in the development of trauma-informed relational approaches that schools picked up, leading to improvements in attendance, inclusion and relationships across the school environment.

Now the programme is supported by a team of six in the council’s education department who run a series of training programmes to support schools to develop a ‘whole school’ approach to relational and restorative practice.

More than 70 schools have taken part, with 45 schools going through the relational schools programme. The schools adopting this approach have found that the children in their care feel safe, heard, happy, and say they have a trusted adult to whom they can talk. The school environment is also calmer.

This is leading to improved teacher retention, with reduced absences because of work-related stress, and improved feedback from staff on their desire to stay within the profession. Ultimately, this has all resulted in improved mental health among both the children and staff.

We also want to see ‘whole education’ approaches to mental health and wellbeing embedded across all education settings (including the early years), supported by an evidence-based understanding of an inclusive school. This should be a core element of the curriculum review.

There also needs to be a focus on the mental health workforce, and mental health training should be a core element of coaching for all staff who support children and young people.

Councils know that children’s mental health is not just a children’s services issue. Poor mental health is driven by a range of different aspects and a ‘whole council’ focus can make significant improvements for young people and their families.

So, councils should look at ‘place planning’ with children’s mental health in mind – for example, by provision of youth-friendly spaces, access to green space for young people, access to youth services, and by facilitating support around schools (see case study, above).

Leverage that will become available through the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill will provide councils with a greater opportunity to work more

closely with schools; and they should also consider the specific needs of some groups who may be more likely to have poor mental health, such as children in care, young carers, and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The task and finish group’s recommendations have been agreed by the LGA’s Children and Young People Board and will form the basis for our future policy and lobbying work – particularly on the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bills.

We will also be producing updated resources for councillors, which will be available soon on the LGA’s website.

With councils across the country marking Children’s Mental Health Week earlier this month (3-9 Feb), we hope these new resources, case studies and our recommendations will make a real difference to the lives of children and young people everywhere. ●

**i** See [local.gov.uk/topics/children-and-young-people](https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/children-and-young-people) for more on the working group’s recommendations and case studies of council good practice

# firewatch

## Always Connected

For a complete picture of your FRS operations

- Integrated Resource Management
- Prevention, Protection and Hydrants
- Enhanced Emergency Response

[firewatch.co.uk/demo](https://firewatch.co.uk/demo)  
LGA Fire, Stand 10

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## LGA Annual Fire Conference and Exhibition

11-12 March 2025  
Hilton Hotel, Newcastle Gateshead

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

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

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





**Councillor Carolyn Lambert is Vice-Chair of the LGA's Fire Services Management Committee**

**A**s Vice-Chair of the LGA's Fire Services Management Committee, I first want to thank Cllr Frank Biederman, our outgoing Chair, for his work over the past two years and for leading the LGA's work around fire.

I wanted to look to the year ahead for the fire sector, which is going to be one of opportunity and challenge.

The new Government has been clear that reform of the fire service is on its agenda, which is positive and something for which the LGA has called.

However, in tandem with wider discussions around devolution, and fire and rescue authorities' place within any new devolution framework, there is some uncertainty about what the future will hold. Funding for fire services is another source of uncertainty and continues to be a major challenge.

The LGA, alongside the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), is calling for greater financial stability to allow fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) to adequately plan and invest in local services and estates, and ensure they are fit for the future.

Governance and FRA members' role in scrutiny and holding senior leaders to account are things government and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) are looking at closely.

This comes after a number of media stories, inspections, independent reviews and inquiries over the past few years, which have all highlighted examples of poor behaviour, bullying and harassment in the fire and rescue sector.

Dame Diana Johnson DBE, Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Reduction – who was previously Chair of the Commons' Home Affairs Select Committee when it was undertaking an inquiry into culture in fire and rescue services – has been clear about the importance of FRAs,



# Opportunities and challenges

## Reshaping the future of fire services

saying they have a “crucial role to play in ensuring that leaders are held to account for their behaviour”.

Members of FRAs, through our governance role, are absolutely vital to driving change and ensuring that services are running effectively: I encourage members to think about this and how to demonstrate that we are doing it.

There is a host of information and resources on the LGA's website to support councillors in their roles as FRA members.

The LGA also holds events, such as Leadership Essentials, a training programme for FRA members (see [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/leadership-essentials](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/leadership-essentials)), as well as our flagship annual fire conference and exhibition, which this year takes place from 11-12 March in Gateshead.

The theme of this year's conference will be 'The future of the fire sector: opportunities and challenges', and we are delighted that Building Safety Minister

Alex Norris MP has been confirmed as a keynote speaker. We will also hear from a range of experts, including from HMICFRS and NFCC, on topics including extreme weather, devolution, finance and building safety – all of which will give attendees a grounding in current issues in the fire sector.

The LGA's fire conference is also an excellent way to network with other FRA members and chief fire officers, and to explore exhibitors' stands. We hope to see many of you in Gateshead in March. ●

**i** As **first** was going to press, Cllr Wendy Maples was confirmed as the new Chair of the LGA's Fire Services Management Committee. See [local.gov.uk/events](http://local.gov.uk/events) to book your place at the LGA's annual fire conference in Gateshead, from 11-12 March. You can find out more about the LGA's support for the fire and rescue service at [local.gov.uk/topics/fire-and-rescue](http://local.gov.uk/topics/fire-and-rescue)

# Reforming sentencing

A path to justice and rehabilitation



**Councillor Heather Kidd is Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board**

**L**ast autumn, the UK Government launched a comprehensive review of sentencing practices, led by former Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary David Gauke, to address concerns about sentencing effectiveness.

Open for public evidence from November 2024 to January 2025, the review focuses on punishment, public safety, reducing reoffending and expanding non-custodial options. The LGA contributed to this initiative.

England and Wales face a growing prison population, reaching 87,900 in 2024, with annual costs per prisoner soaring to £51,724.

Despite a £4 billion investment for 20,000 new prison places, delays and rising costs have led to warnings of a 12,400-place shortage by 2027.

Overcrowding has driven reliance on temporary early-release schemes, with more than 3,000 individuals released in 2024 under modified conditions. While easing strain, these measures fail to address systemic challenges.

Reoffending remains a significant issue. In 2022, the reoffending rate was 33.9 per cent for adults released from custody, rising to 56.6 per



cent for sentences of less than 12 months.

Evidence suggests community-based sentences could reduce reoffending by four percentage points.

Employment and education are critical to breaking the cycle, as steady employment reduces reoffending by 9 per cent.

Programmes such as the Prisoners' Education Trust also enhance job prospects and cut reoffending rates.

However, barriers persist. Many prisoners lack basic literacy skills, with their educational progress disrupted because of frequent transfers between facilities.

In 2024, 13 per cent of prison leavers faced homelessness, doubling their likelihood of reoffending.

Stable housing is essential for reintegration, as is addressing addictions and mental health issues.

Comprehensive assessment, treatment and support are

necessary to tackle underlying causes of offending and enhance rehabilitation.

The Labour election manifesto emphasised reducing reoffending through rehabilitation and victim-focused justice.

The LGA advocates for expanding community-based sentences as cost-effective alternatives to incarceration, emphasising a role for community safety partnerships in coordinating (but not managing) programmes such as community payback.

However, councils require sufficient funding and resources to succeed.

Employment and housing initiatives are critical to reintegration. Businesses such as Greggs demonstrate the benefits of employing ex-

offenders, while councils could be incentivised to provide training and jobs.

Tailored education programmes addressing prisoners' needs and ensuring continuity across facilities are vital, with up to 50 per cent of prisoners in 2022 lacking the literacy skills to engage with educational initiatives.

The review excludes 'imprisonment for public protection' sentences, but the LGA has raised concerns about their harmful long-term impact, calling for reform.

The review presents an opportunity for innovative solutions to reduce reoffending and enhance public safety.

Rehabilitation-focused sentencing, addressing systemic barriers such as homelessness, and fostering partnerships among government, councils and businesses are essential.

Sentences should balance punishment with equipping offenders to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to society. By expanding non-custodial options, addressing education and housing challenges, and integrating healthcare with justice initiatives, the Government can enhance rehabilitation, reduce reoffending and ensure justice serves both individuals and the community. ●

**i** The Independent Sentencing Review's now closed call for evidence is available at [bit.ly/4gjf85G](https://bit.ly/4gjf85G) To find out more about the LGA's community safety work, please see [www.local.gov.uk/community-safety](https://www.local.gov.uk/community-safety)



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

# Helping working-age people be councillors

The LGA has published new guidance for employees and employers

**R**epresentation in leadership is fundamental for inclusive and informed decision-making.

In addition to protected characteristics such as age, gender and race, true representation also encompasses wider insights, such as paid employment and caring responsibilities.

According to the LGA's 'National Census of local authority councillors 2022', the average age of councillors was 60 years, 16 per cent were aged under 45, 42 per cent were 65 or over, and 32 per cent were in employment. Further research within the LGA has also heard that many young people feel uncertain that they could balance the demands of paid employment with the role of a councillor.

To support working-age people to consider standing for election and thrive in both employment and their community role, the LGA's Be a Councillor campaign has developed a guide for employees and employers.

The guide is informed by focus group sessions with elected members, which drew out, in detail, the mutual benefits of employing a councillor – with the most important being the broad range of highly transferable skills – and examples of the kind of support from employers that had enabled working-age councillors

to undertake both roles effectively.

This support included a culture of corporate social responsibility and the availability of flexible working options.

The guide details the councillor role and expectations, the transferable skills benefit, practicalities around time commitment, and the right to time off for public duties, as well as valuable tips to help ensure effective working cultures and arrangements.

It encourages prospective candidates to thoroughly investigate the practicalities of the role – for example, how frequently meetings take place and the level of responsibility involved. The importance of discussing issues with employers ahead of standing for election is also promoted, particularly managing competing demands and ensuring elected member and employee roles remain distinct.

The guide also signposts the broad range of support for prospective and elected councillors through the national Be a Councillor campaign, local council events, and the programmes of activity run by the LGA's political groups, including hearing from councillors currently balancing the role with employment.

Employers are encouraged to consider how they can provide the enabling support identified by councillors, such as: options for flexible, remote, part-time or compressed working hours; recognition

## What do you think of Be a Councillor?

Since 2009, the LGA's Be a Councillor programme has encouraged people from a broad range of backgrounds to put themselves forward to become local councillors. To help us assess its long-term impact and plan its next phase, please complete our evaluation survey at [moredetails.uk/3X3ed2L](https://moredetails.uk/3X3ed2L) by Friday 28 February 2025.

of the transferable skills that elected members bring to employment; and consideration for people in varying types of work – such as those in frontline roles with shift patterns.

The guide also outlines the more general benefits of corporate social responsibility, staff recruitment and retention, and the importance of setting out such cultures and practices in organisational policies, to support elected members and organisations to thrive together. ●



**i** The 'Be a Councillor guide for employers and employees' is available at [moredetails.uk/3Q72yvS](https://moredetails.uk/3Q72yvS)

# Unlocking the potential

AI can revolutionise local government and drive growth



Councillor Louise Gittins is  
Chair of the LGA

**T**he UK is on the cusp of a digital revolution in government.

While central government has made significant progress in ensuring the wider public sector uses technology effectively – for example, through its recently published ‘AI opportunities action plan’ and its ‘Blueprint for modern digital government’ – it is local government that holds the key to unlocking the true potential of artificial intelligence (AI).

This potential isn’t simply about digitising existing processes; it’s about fundamentally reshaping public services to improve lives, build stronger communities and drive economic growth.

Local authorities are already demonstrating their potential as leaders in AI-driven innovation. Their deep understanding of community needs, trusted relationships with residents, and access to extensive datasets make them ideal innovators.

Councils are pioneering the use of AI to improve lives and boost local economies, and showcasing its potential to transform public services and deliver truly resident-centric solutions, and as a powerful force for good in local communities.

AI can transform libraries into even more vibrant community hubs, offering AI-powered learning tools, personalised reading recommendations, and interactive workshops on coding and digital literacy.

Councils can leverage AI-powered data analytics to identify individuals at risk of social isolation, proactively connecting them with relevant support services and community groups.

Social workers, equipped with AI-powered assistants on their tablets, can automate administrative tasks such as taking notes and scheduling meetings, freeing them to focus on building relationships and providing personalised support to families.

Residents can use AI chatbots to report issues such as potholes, schedule repairs, and access council services 24/7, while AI-powered platforms facilitate meaningful online engagement in local decision-making by summarising diverse perspectives and identifying common ground.

Achieving this vision requires more than just technology; it demands a shift in mindset, a commitment to innovation, and a willingness to embrace new ways of working.

This transformation also requires strong partnerships between local authorities and innovative technology providers, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These businesses, often at the forefront of AI development, bring agility, specialised expertise and fresh perspectives to address the unique challenges faced by local government.

Initiatives such as the LGA’s Technology Innovation Showcase, in partnership with digital transformation partner PUBLIC, demonstrate the power of collaboration. By bringing together councils and SMEs, it fosters co-creation, knowledge sharing, and the development of tailored solutions for local communities. This approach accelerates digital transformation, and

ensures responsible, ethical and safe AI development and deployment.

The LGA is committed to supporting councils on their AI journey. Our AI hub provides resources, including case studies of how councils are using AI, policy briefings, and soon-to-be published explainer videos (see next month’s **first** for more on these).

The LGA has also established dedicated AI networks for council staff, fostering peer learning and knowledge sharing.

In addition, we are actively engaging with government and regulators to ensure local government’s voice shapes national AI policy, and we’re collaborating on practical guidance for councils on how to deploy AI safely.

Local government’s embrace of AI can be a powerful engine for UK industrial growth. By harnessing data and AI, councils can analyse local economic trends to identify emerging sectors for investment and support. They can model and optimise local infrastructure to ensure it supports economic activity, analyse skills gaps and future workforce needs to develop targeted training programmes, and foster vibrant innovation ecosystems by connecting businesses, researchers and investors.

Despite this potential, significant challenges remain. Funding constraints, skills gaps and capacity limitations are hindering wider AI adoption.

To unlock the true potential of AI in local government, a coordinated national approach is crucial. This must include a seat at the table: local government must have a strong voice in shaping national AI strategies and guidance. These challenges and priorities must be recognised and integrated into public, sector-wide support programmes, and a direct relationship between local government and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) is essential.

**“A coordinated national approach is crucial. This must include a seat at the table: local government must have a strong voice in shaping national AI strategies”**



A coordinated national approach also requires targeted support: councils need tailored help to drive digital innovation, including funding for new technologies and approaches to service delivery.

This should involve working with technology company partners to develop scalable solutions and modernise legacy IT systems. Additionally, funding should be allocated to equip council staff with essential digital skills, and capacity building provided for councillors to ensure robust local democratic oversight of AI deployment.

A centralised body, such as the LGA's proposed Local Government Centre for Digital Technology, could efficiently channel this support.

We also need robust assurance and competition, amid concerns about market concentration, as responsible AI deployment hinges on trustworthy development.

Mandatory adherence to standards such as the DSIT's 'AI management essentials', coupled with third-party verification, is vital to ensure public trust, while local government can play a pivotal role in fostering competition in the AI market, particularly by supporting SMEs and encouraging innovative solutions.

AI can be a powerful tool for digital inclusion, but its implementation requires careful consideration to avoid widening existing inequalities. Local authorities are crucial partners in achieving national digital inclusion goals and require adequate resources to implement effective programmes.

We also need an integrated approach to infrastructure.

Local government supports the UK Government's digital connectivity ambitions to drive economic growth, stimulate local economies, and ensure all regions benefit from next-generation digital infrastructure.

In line with the Government's digital transformation ambitions from analogue to digital public service delivery, particularly in the NHS over the next 10 years, connectivity and sustainable AI infrastructure are essential.

AI infrastructure must be considered in an integrated way with other forms of digital infrastructure plans and connectivity ambitions that the Government has, and local government should be considered a key partner in delivery.

Finally, we need regulatory clarity: the current AI regulatory landscape is fragmented and confusing.

A centralised, proactive approach, led by DSIT, is needed to provide clarity and foster innovation. This approach should include clear guidelines on the ethical use of AI, ensuring responsible development and deployment with appropriate oversight mechanisms to mitigate potential risks and societal harms.

AI has the potential to revolutionise local government, driving efficiency, improving services, and boosting productivity. As the Government pushes for growth and innovation, local authorities must be empowered to harness the transformative power of AI.

This requires investment, skills development, risk mitigation, and a collaborative approach that puts local government at the heart of the UK's AI revolution. Only then can we ensure that everyone benefits from the potential of AI innovation. ●

**i** The LGA's 'State of digital local government' is available at [www.local.gov.uk/publications](http://www.local.gov.uk/publications). See [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology) for more on the LGA's digital policy work and support for councils, and our AI hub



Councillor Mike Barnes (Lab, Calderdale) is Chair of public sector procurement organisation YPO

# Buying into procurement reform

The Procurement Act 2023 will go live on 24 February. Now is the time for councils and their elected members to understand what the act means for them.

Councillors need not be procurement professionals, but getting to grips with the fundamental changes coming into play, and being able to scrutinise and ask the right questions, is increasingly important to ensure councils get the best value for money.

The new regulations are aiming to deliver quicker, simpler and more transparent processes. They will make it easier for small and medium-sized enterprises, and voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise organisations to compete, and will be tougher on suppliers that don't deliver.

If these ambitions are achieved, the act will help councils ensure that budgets are well managed and that best value is achieved across council revenue and capital expenditure.

The Procurement Act 2023 will redefine many aspects of the procurement process.

It is one of the most significant shake-ups of procurement policy in a generation and will be accompanied by a National Procurement Policy Statement that sets out government's strategic priorities for public procurement.

According to the UK



Government, one in every three pounds of public money, around £300 billion a year, is spent on public procurement – a statistic that demonstrates the sheer scale of the transformation at hand. Of this, councils in England report spend of around £85 billion.

Any regulatory reform has its challenges, and doubly so in a marketplace as diverse and expansive as the UK public sector.

The new procurement regime offers potential value and competition, and can assist decision-making, but it may seem a daunting prospect to councils operating under already tight capacity.

Key elements of the Procurement Act 2023 include:

- procurement notices –

notice requirements will be part of each stage of the procurement process, to allow full transparency across the procurement lifecycle, from planning to tender, contract award, contract management and termination.

- centralised digital platform – a new platform for public procurements, to encourage transparency across public sector tendering by bringing all available information together.
- training and guidance – the Government offers a free training package to help public sector organisations implement the new rules.

More than 5,000 procurement officers in local

government have already undertaken this training. Further information and short guides for senior leaders can be accessed at [gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-act-2023-short-guides](https://gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-act-2023-short-guides).

Public sector procurement organisations – council-owned, socially responsible and non-profit – can support local authorities as they navigate the upcoming change.

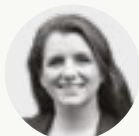
Procurement reform presents challenges for public sector organisations, requiring councils to adapt while balancing limited resources. Effective procurement is vital for easing budget pressures, delivering cost savings and achieving public service goals.

Collaborating with public sector procurement organisations will provide councils with essential expertise and streamline processes. These partnerships can reduce administrative burdens, improve financial outcomes, and support local priorities, such as sustainability and job creation.

By leveraging partnerships with public sector procurement organisations, councils can manoeuvre through this reform more effectively, unlock financial and social value, and create capacity to focus on delivering quality services to their communities. ●

**i** The YPO is publicly owned by 13 local authorities, see [www.ypo.co.uk](https://www.ypo.co.uk). Please visit the LGA's procurement hub at [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/procurement-hub](https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/procurement-hub) for resources, information and support on implementing the Procurement Act 2023

# Localising employment support



**Alison McGovern MP is  
Minister for Employment**

**Transforming job centres** from the country's 'most unloved public service' into places where people can receive quality career support is a key ambition for me.

Giving autonomy to local authorities to tackle inactivity is essential to beginning to achieve this, as we announced in the Get Britain Working White Paper in November.

Every councillor knows that, in their ward, there will be people who deserve a better chance in life: the family that struggles with childcare, or the kids barely out of school who were hit hard by the pandemic and have never bounced back.

Everyone deserves an opportunity in life, and I am determined that our back-to-work system – our job centres and the support alongside them – will get better.

But these chances are often created by very local factors – for example, how far from the city centre you are, if there is a good bus, train or tram service, local childcare availability, and the affordability of housing near jobs.

You can't divorce the opportunities people have from the place they come from. That's why our Get Britain Working White Paper made a promise to localise and personalise the support we give.

So, we are asking all areas in England to develop 'Local Get Britain Working Plans' – a strategy for how to tackle economic inactivity locally and integrate locally delivered services.

The plans will be delivered in strategic authorities and local authorities in England, but in partnership with the NHS, employers and the voluntary sector.

I want job centres to be a part of the local infrastructure that helps people move on in life. Working with family hubs, GPs, colleges and employers, we will get



**“People’s chances are so heavily dictated by where they live. This has to change. It is a waste of their talents”**

support to people and take down the barriers that prevent progress.

Get Britain Working Plans put places at the forefront of how this happens. In some places, there are lots of jobs, but challenges for some people in getting them. In other areas, we need more investment in good jobs and help for those who are overlooked when recruitment happens.

To go further, we have 16 economic inactivity trailblazers on health and young people to try out new approaches.

Investment of £125 million will go towards mayoral strategic authorities putting in place locally joined-up work, health and skills support as a way of accelerating how we help people on the journey into work and those at risk of leaving employment.

There is also funding for areas in England and Wales to design and deliver

their own, bespoke employment support. Connect to Work will support disabled people, and those with health conditions and complex barriers to work, to get into and progress in jobs.

For too long, opportunity has been a postcode lottery. People's chances and opportunities are so heavily dictated by where they live. This has to change. It is a waste of people's time and talents, and we cannot afford it any more.

All of us need help from time to time. Any of us could become unwell or unable to continue with the career we've been in. We need a system where we can all access help to change jobs, to get back into work. ●

See [www.gov.uk/government/publications](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications) for the Get Britain Working White Paper

## GROUP LEADERS



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

### Retaining the 'local' in local government

As we continue to discuss devolution and the reorganisation of local government following the publication of the English Devolution White Paper, the one question councillors need to have on their minds is: how does this benefit my community?

It was a former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, who often used the phrase 'all politics is local'.

Regardless of the different plans being submitted to government for consideration, it is vital that we retain

the 'local' in local government, so our communities feel they're at the heart of the political decision-making process.

The Shadow Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities team in the House of Commons, backed by the leaders of the Conservative local government family, have published their five key tests on local government reorganisation.

One of those tests focuses on accountability, and whether local people will have a greater say on the decisions that have an impact on their day-to-day lives.

When Wiltshire became a unitary council in 2009, several area committees were set up to ensure that the council could build community leadership and engagement, to bring the council closer to the doors of local people.

We should strive to use best practice from across the sector to ensure we retain the 'local' in local government.

The proposals in the white paper will be

**"Our communities [need to] feel they're at the heart of the political decision-making process"**

seen as some of the most seismic changes to local government since the original Local Government Act 1974.

On devolution, I think the Government could go much further on true devolution.

Aside from decisions on determining cattle-grid applications now ourselves, in reality the white paper details very little of what is being devolved down from Whitehall to local leaders.

Local government can be trusted to deliver with the right powers.

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

## Drip-feed funding 'weakening' services



Councillor Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA

While this month's final local government finance settlement confirmed a 6.8 per cent cash increase and extra money towards increased employer National Insurance contributions, councils' finances remain extremely challenging.

The pressures and needs they face must be seen in the context of the huge contribution councils already make and their potential to do more to support the delivery of public services.

Despite the financial pressure

councils have been under since 2010/11, the vast majority have met their statutory responsibility to balance their books annually. But this does not mean services remain unchanged and sustainable: council spend is increasingly concentrated in fewer services and on fewer people, with growing concerns over the quality and scale of service provision, increasingly unsustainable workforce challenges, and reduced spend on preventative services.

These outcomes show that simply keeping councils on a financial drip-feed has not prevented the steady narrowing and weakening of council services.

Councils need a significant and sustained increase in overall funding to stem the emerging risk of system-wide financial failure, and to

ensure that councils can meet growing demand for the vital services needed by their communities.

In addition, there is growing evidence that the wider local government revenue funding system itself desperately needs reform. We believe a cross-party review is required, which must include a review of council tax, alongside other council funding sources, and consider whether business rates retention represents a viable future funding model.

We should look to build a sector-wide consensus on the nature of any proposed reform.

Ministers have committed to multi-year settlements and are currently consulting on changes to the system that underpins the local government finance settlement, while the LGA continues to make the case for finance reforms, sufficient resourcing, and investment ahead of the Spending Review in June.

Creating a more sustainable funding system for local government has the potential to strengthen the value for money of local spending and, most importantly, improve outcomes for the people and places councils serve.



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

## Working together locally and nationally

For the first time in 15 years, Labour councillors from around the country came together at the Labour Local Government Conference under a Labour Government.

The commitment of local and national government to work together to deliver the decade of national renewal that the country so desperately needs was a welcome relief after years of Conservative mismanagement and lack of understanding.

### “Labour local government has worked to deliver fair outcomes for residents”

It was great to hear from Angela Rayner MP, our Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, as she delivered a keynote speech, followed by a Q&A with Chair of the LGA, Cllr Louise Gittins. We received ministerial representatives from across government departments, including Jim McMahon MP, the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, along with council leaders from around the country, all keen to deliver change for their communities.

Attendees participated in a range of training sessions, from working with the media to managing casework, and specific sessions for opposition councillors, whips and those working in coalition or no overall control, all designed to maximise effectiveness.

This Labour Government is working to bring the politics of public service back into national government. We know that Labour local government has worked through difficult times to deliver innovative solutions and fair outcomes for residents, with public service at the heart of everything they do.



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

## Ensuring no child goes hungry

Central and local government need to work together to build a healthier and fairer society.

So, I am pleased to see that my Lib Dem colleague Munira Wilson MP is pushing ahead in Parliament to amend the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

This would extend free school meals to the 900,000 children in poverty up to the age of 18 who are currently excluded.

It's disappointing to see the Labour Government is not taking this opportunity to ensure that no child goes hungry. All the evidence shows it helps them to concentrate and learn.

This is more than just making sure they can do well throughout the school day – important though that is! Making sure all kids can have a decent diet is also about the broader public health agenda, which affects the wider community.

### “Evidence shows that free school meals help children concentrate and learn”

By the time you get this first, we will know what public health funding will be for local authorities so we can help tackle some of the root causes of bad health, no matter your age.

Could it include reversing the cuts made by the Conservative Government's emergency budget in the summer of 2015?

This could include funding for schemes to encourage smoking cessation or supporting exercise classes.

We must keep pushing for a healthier and fairer society. Government – both local and national – has a key role to play.

## GROUP LEADERS



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

## Solar on roofs, not farmland

As global unrest and increasing tariffs unfold, I am very concerned about the threat to our farmland from the drive to install outdated solar panels.

Our members have raised concerns about the takeover by the global solar industry of many thousands of acres of farmland, while 630,000 acres of south-facing commercial roofs lie vacant.

We're looking at glass, steel and concrete covering areas the size of cities, setting our villages in an industrial landscape.

Good farmland will be locked out for 60 years, handed instead to global companies under long-term contracts, paid for by us with inflated electricity bills.

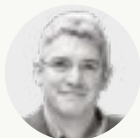
### “It is easy to label concerned residents as ‘nimbys’ to delegitimise their voices”

According to a Lincolnshire farmer, speaking to the BBC, you'd expect a return of maybe £200 an acre a year on corn arable land, and (now) they're being offered £1,000, index-linked for 50 years.

Solar belongs on roofs, car parks, down railway lines and motorways, located as near to where it is being used as possible, to avoid swathes of countryside being dug up for power cables and large battery sites.

It is easy to label concerned residents as 'nimbys', to delegitimise and ride roughshod over them and their voices, but we need energy security and food security. We should be investing in up-to-date technology, using modern solar panels that are light and can easily go on any surface. If you are interested in helping this campaign, please email [independent.groupplga@local.gov.uk](mailto:independent.groupplga@local.gov.uk). ●

# Why protecting access to cash matters



**John Howells is Chief Executive Officer of LINK**

In today's digital age, it's easy to assume that cash is becoming obsolete. But around five million people in the UK are still reliant on cash. Many others use digital payments, but continue to depend on cash for certain purchases.

This is why LINK remains committed to ensuring that access to cash remains protected across the UK.

We carry out in-depth cash-

access reviews to identify where banking hubs and other cash services, such as ATMs, are needed – vital resources for vulnerable, cash-reliant individuals and small businesses alike.

Banking hubs are not only a lifeline for those who rely on cash, but also support local retailers by making it easier to deposit cash, ensuring cash acceptance stays viable on our high streets.

Does your community need better cash access? We maintain a live view of the UK's cash machines, post offices and bank branches, and the vast majority of people have good access to cash.



Calderdale Council's Cllr Diana Tremayne and Todmorden Town Council's Cllr Tyler Hanley at Todmorden's temporary banking hub

However, if you feel access to cash is insufficient in your area, contact us. There's no substitute for local knowledge.

Elected representatives can request a cash-access review, and we've already helped dozens of towns by recommending banking hubs.

A great example comes from Todmorden, in Calder Valley, where local councillors reached out to LINK when the

town lost its last bank. After a site visit, we recommended a banking hub, and a temporary hub has now been set up, while work continues on securing a permanent site.

The way we're paying for things is changing. It is LINK's role to protect free cash access across the UK. If you believe your town needs better access, visit our website and let us help. ●

**i** LINK is a not-for-profit company working in the public interest to ensure people in every corner of the UK can access cash. See [www.link.co.uk](http://www.link.co.uk) to find out more

# Support for affordable housing clearing service



**Ian Workman is Chief Customer Officer at Homes England**

Nearly 250 local authorities and registered providers have signed up to the Section 106 Affordable Housing Clearing Service since we launched it in late 2024, with the help of sector partners. They join 80 housebuilders, and counting.

The service aims to help facilitate and accelerate the sale of unsold Section 106 (s106) affordable homes across England (excluding London) by connecting housebuilders with registered providers and local authorities.

It's essentially an online secure database that provides a single place for registered providers and local authorities to view s106 affordable homes recorded by developers.

We're urging builders to continue their support by registering and, crucially, providing key details about affordable homes for which they have planning permission to build, but for which they are unable to find a buyer.

Where local authorities are aware of unsold s106 affordable homes in their area, we would encourage them to signpost housebuilders towards the service.

We know providers are spending time viewing details that sellers have inputted to

the service, which was created thanks to feedback from ongoing sector engagement.

We know this new service is a small and relatively simple step within a much broader discussion on how to meet affordable housing challenges. We will continue to explore how else we can tackle the issue, but I'm heartened by the support the sector has shown for this measure so far. It's key to maintaining momentum and realising impact.

By supporting greater visibility of opportunities, we hope a simple suggestion can make a positive difference to delivering new affordable homes and helping local authorities meet housing need.

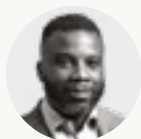
Local authorities, registered

providers and housebuilders can use our Section 106 Affordable Housing Clearing Service. Head to our website at [www.gov.uk/guidance/register-to-sell-and-buy-section-106-affordable-homes](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/register-to-sell-and-buy-section-106-affordable-homes) for more information and our online registration form, where you can provide details for up to five users.

Once access is approved, you can use the service to either input details or view information. Thank you for your continued support. ●

**i** Homes England is a non-departmental public body that funds new affordable housing in England. See [www.gov.uk/homes-england](http://www.gov.uk/homes-england)

# Collaborating with our peers



**Stephen Gabriel is Chief Executive of Tamworth Borough Council**

**I joined Tamworth** Borough Council as Chief Executive just 10 months ago, in April 2024. At first, I was very much in fact-finding mode; I saw fantastic things, but also things we could do better.

More recently, the council underwent an LGA corporate peer challenge, and this has been a pivotal opportunity to gain external perspectives from our peers, validate our successes, and identify areas that need improvement.

Collaborating with organisations such as the LGA is crucial for support and growth not only within Tamworth, but also across the wider local government sector; we're all facing similar challenges, so working collaboratively can only make tackling those challenges easier for everyone.

Seeking a corporate peer challenge was also a chance for members to see where we stand compared with others and identify areas for improvement.

Our feedback report is acting as a foundation document for service and organisational transformation.

I particularly asked for a focus on community cohesion after we experienced civil unrest in August 2024. Having external local government experts provide their views on our progress in this area was invaluable.

Transparency and communication are part of my core values, and I'm glad the peer challenge report is an open document, accessible to all stakeholders, to be used as a tool to initiate a dialogue.

It's essential for staff to be aware of the findings and recommendations, as this fosters a culture of openness and continuous improvement.

One of my goals is to ensure that Tamworth is a high-performing authority, and the peer challenge is a step towards achieving that.



In terms of process, it was positive and collaborative. With the peer team, it felt more like sharing our story than being inspected!

Preparation was key, and I was pleased with how well we prepared for the challenge; we already knew our story, our strengths and our weaknesses. This set a positive tone and left a good impression on the peer team.

One of my most memorable moments was from the initial feedback session at the end of the peer team's visit. They were genuinely impressed with our preparation and the positive steps we had taken. This was a moment of pride; it validated our efforts and gave us the confidence to continue on our path of improvement.

The feedback report highlighted areas for improvement, but there are no alarming findings. This tempered my initial urgency to implement changes overnight and is allowing me to focus on key areas for cultural shift and organisational development.

The report provided a clear direction for our efforts, and I and my corporate management team are committed to addressing the recommendations.

I'm also taking steps to encourage my leadership team to actively participate in the LGA process by supporting the peer challenge with other local authorities.

I see this as an integral part of their professional development and important for fostering a more strategic approach within the council.

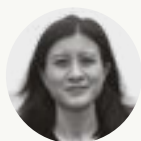
Overall, for us, the LGA corporate peer challenge is proving a valuable experience. It has provided external validation, identified areas for improvement, and set the stage for future growth.

I am optimistic about the positive impact this will have on our council and community. ●

**i** To find out more about the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge programme, visit [www.local.gov.uk/peerchallenge](http://www.local.gov.uk/peerchallenge). Tamworth Borough Council's corporate peer challenge visit took place last October. As **first** was going to press, the peer challenge feedback report and the council's draft action plan were being scrutinised by councillors



# Climate change and flood risk



**Julie Foley is Director of Flood & Coastal Risk Management, Strategy & National Adaptation, at the Environment Agency**

**Understanding flood and** coastal erosion risk is vital to ensuring that policymakers, practitioners and communities are ready to adapt to a changing climate.

We have lived with and seen the devastating effects of flooding and coastal erosion over many decades. We know that they can cause significant economic damage to people, businesses, landowners and infrastructure.

Communities are on the front line of flooding and coastal erosion, and we all have a role to play in ensuring we keep them informed of the risk they face.

At the Environment Agency, we are required to update our understanding of current and future flood and coastal erosion risk as part of our statutory roles under the 2010 Flood and Water

Management Act. We have spent the past four years working with inland and coastal local authorities across England, including the LGA Coastal Special Interest Group, to develop a new National Flood Risk Assessment (NaFRA) and a new National Coastal Erosion Risk Map (NCERM).

For the first time, both the NaFRA and NCERM data include assessments of future risk that account for the latest UK climate projections from the Met Office. This is vital, because we will continue to see the impacts of a changing climate leading to more frequent and severe flooding and storms.

We have already witnessed this across the country this winter. At the start of January, heavy rainfall and snowmelt resulted in significant river and surface-water flooding across large parts of England, with 1,600 properties affected.

We have to be prepared for more of this throughout the year as our weather patterns become increasingly unpredictable. The new NaFRA shows that around 6.3 million properties in England are in areas at risk of flooding from one of, or a combination of, rivers,

the sea and surface water. According to the new NCERM, 3,500 properties are in areas at risk of coastal erosion from now until 2055.

National and regional data from the NaFRA and NCERM feature in our recently published 'National assessment of flood and coastal erosion risk in England 2024' (see [moredetails.uk/4jJT5rV](https://www.moredetails.uk/4jJT5rV)), and in our online long-term flood-risk checker (see [moredetails.uk/4aNss1c](https://www.moredetails.uk/4aNss1c)).

Next month, we will be updating our 'Flood Map for Planning', again using the new NaFRA data to show how climate change may affect the extent of flood risk from rivers and the sea in the future, and to display surface-water risk.

This improved service will assist council planners and local developers to make decisions about the location and design of new residential and commercial developments, and make it easier to produce flood-risk assessments. ●

**i** To find out more, please visit [www.gov.uk/guidance/updates-to-national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-information](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/updates-to-national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-information)

# Democracy is about more than efficiencies



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

## By-elections were thin

on the ground in January, with attention in the local government community focused instead on the structural reforms proposed in the recent English Devolution White Paper, and the consequent postponement of some of this year's scheduled county council elections.

Not that the contests that did take place were wholly devoid of interest.

The Liberal Democrat gain from the Conservatives in North Devon surely owed something to the rebadging

of the same candidate who had finished a close second, standing as an Independent, in 2023 and with no Liberal Democrat then in the field.

In Bath and North East Somerset, an Independent very narrowly inflicted on the Liberal Democrats their first ever by-election defeat in the history of the unitary authority.

The Saltford ward falls within the constituency lost to Labour by former Business Secretary and Brexit Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg at the July 2024 general election, and the winning candidate was a former Chair of Saltford Parish Council.

It is that kind of hyper-localism that may disappear if the Government's proposals to roll out unitary authorities across England go ahead. More than 6,500 district council seats risk abolition, and a

sharp reduction in councillor numbers and an increase in the councillor/elector ratio is inevitable.

In Buckinghamshire, for example, the creation of a county unitary has reduced the overall number of elected representatives from 236 to 97; in North Yorkshire, the figures are 301 and 90.

Already, we have fewer elected members per head of population than most western democracies: think of the myriad French 'communes'.

Evidence we have collated over the years suggests that engagement in, and turnout at, English local elections is – all things being equal – higher in those authorities that are closer to the electorate, even if they have much lower budgets

and provide fewer services than their 'upper tier' counterparts.

The efficiency and economies-of-

## By-election results

### Bath and North East Somerset, Saltford

**IND GAIN** FROM LIB DEM  
0.2% over Lib Dem | Turnout **40.3%**

### Cotswold, Chesterton

**LIB DEM HELD**  
23.4% over Reform | Turnout **35.4%**

### Liverpool, Much Woolton and Hunts Cross

**LIB DEM HELD**  
24.0% over Lab | Turnout **20.7%**

### Newcastle-under-Lyme, Town

**LAB HELD**  
10.7% over Con | Turnout **18.7%**

### North Devon, Instow

**LIB DEM GAIN** FROM CON  
6.0% over Con | Turnout **27.3%**

**i** For more data on all recent by-elections, please visit [lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections](https://www.local.gov.uk/first)

scale argument is, of course, a powerful one, but democracy is about more than just that.

The Government should be careful what it wishes for in a purely party political sense, too.

Corby Borough Council, in Northamptonshire, was Labour for all but three of its 48 years of existence; there seems little likelihood of Labour ever controlling the new North Northamptonshire of which it is now a part.

Something similar could be the case in a range of other discrete towns and cities.

For example, Labour has provided the leadership in Exeter, Ipswich and Norwich for the vast bulk of the past 40 years; in Stevenage, the party has had majority control since the council was established in 1974.

It is hard to envisage a unitary Devon, Suffolk, Norfolk or Hertfordshire ever being in the party's column. ●





# LGA 2025

**Conference and Exhibition**  
#LGACnf25 | 1–3 JULY | LIVERPOOL