

first

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Mind the gaps

Last month, the LGA made its submission to the Treasury ahead of the 2025 Spending Review, due on 11 June (p10).

With councils facing an estimated £8 billion gap in their finances by 2028/29, we continue to press for sufficient and sustainable funding by highlighting the impact of rising cost and demand pressures on local services including provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities (p4), council housing (p5), free bus passes (p6) and temporary accommodation (p7).

Elsewhere in this month's edition of **first**, you can read about our responses to consultations on local government funding reforms (p12) and on councillor standards in England (p13).

We look at council leadership in combined authorities (p14), and reflect on gender equality and leadership in response to this month's International Women's Day (p16).

Our lead comment is from Kevin Hollinrake MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (p21), and we also hear from the WLGA on a new independent working group on sustainable local government in Wales (p24).

As ever, for the latest news and updates from the LGA – including on our new strategic framework (p22) – please visit our website at www.local.gov.uk ●

Councillor Louise Gittins
is LGA Chair

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Half of councils warn of insolvency over SEND



More than half of councils in England that support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) will become insolvent when a temporary accounting measure that keeps SEND-related deficits off their main balance sheets ends next year.

Councils are currently able to keep high-needs deficits – where the cost of providing support outstrips the SEND budgets available to councils – off their main revenue accounts. This ‘statutory override’ expires in March 2026.

An LGA survey found that if the override ends as planned, with no alternative method for addressing deficits, 53 per cent of responding councils would not be able to set

a balanced budget in 2026/27, rising to 63 per cent in 2027/28 and 65 per cent in 2028/29.

The LGA is calling on the Government to urgently address the issue in June’s Spending Review, by writing off councils’ high-needs deficits and reforming the SEND system.

Since reforms to the Children and Families Act 2014, the number of children and young people with education, health and care plans has risen by 140 per cent, from 240,183 to 575,973 in 2023/24. While £1 billion of funding for SEND was announced in the Budget, this is likely to be consumed by partially plugging existing deficits.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA’s

Children and Young People Board, said:

“The ending of the statutory override threatens councils’ financial viability.

“Only by the Government taking bold and brave action in the Spending Review and writing off councils’ high-needs deficits can councils have the financial stability they need to ensure children with SEND get the support they need.

“Putting councils on a stable financial footing has to be part of a comprehensive reform plan that focuses on boosting inclusion in mainstream schools, early years settings and colleges, ensuring they have the capacity and expertise to meet the needs of children with SEND.” ●

Local government finances becoming ‘unsustainable’

Council finances in England are becoming unsustainable because of increasing demand on essential frontline services, the impact of delayed finance reform, and the erosion of investment in preventative programmes.

So says a recent report from the National Audit Office (NAO), the spending watchdog, which called for a “whole-government response” to local authorities’ financial sustainability.

Cllr Pete Marland, Chair of the LGA’s Economy and Resources Board, said: “Councils in England face a funding gap of up to £8 billion by 2028/29.

“While they continue to



innovate and transform services to deliver for communities and provide greater value for money, they desperately need a significant and sustained increase in overall funding

in June’s Spending Review to meet the requirements being placed on them.

“Without adequate funding, councils will continue to struggle to provide crucial services – with devastating

consequences for those who rely on them – and it will be impossible for them to help the Government achieve its reform and growth agenda.

“The NAO rightly highlights that funding pressures are being exacerbated by a lack of reform, which has weakened the financial sustainability of councils and left them with a complex, outdated funding system.

“Creating an improved and more sustainable funding system for local government is also critical to strengthen the value for money of local spending and, most importantly, improve services for communities.” ●

● See p12, funding reform

Planning and infrastructure bill published

Planning fees will be localised and it will be easier for councils to purchase vacant land for house building, under proposals in the new Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

However, councillors will have to undergo mandatory training and certification to sit on planning committees, and a national delegation scheme will set out which planning decisions they will consider and which will be decided by officers.

Cllr Adam Hug, the LGA's Housing and Planning Spokesperson, said: "This bill has included some of the LGA's long-term asks, such as making it easier for councils to purchase vacant land for

housebuilding, localising planning fees, and increasing planning capacity.

"These will speed up the planning process and ease the building of new homes and necessary infrastructure.

"However, there remain concerns around how the bill will ensure that councils – who know their areas best and what they need – remain at the heart of the planning process.

"The democratic role of councillors in decision-making is the backbone of the English planning system, and this should not be diminished. Councils approve nine out of 10 planning applications that come before them." ●

● See p7, p22

Social housing finances 'impacting housebuilding'

The financial strain on social housing across England could lead to government housebuilding targets not being met, according to a new LGA survey.

The survey found that 72 per cent of councils with a housing revenue account expect to draw on their reserves to balance the books in 2025/26.

Additionally, all responding councils expect to raise social housing rents within the allowable limits, while 67 per cent expect reductions in repairs and maintenance.

The Government is currently consulting on a long-term rent settlement of inflation (CPI) plus 1 per cent over five years.

However, only 38 per cent of councils surveyed believe this would provide sufficient funding to support planned new housebuilding programmes.

The LGA is urging the Government to restore £600 million in lost revenue from the 2024/25 rent cap and introduce a 10-year rent settlement, allowing annual increases of up to 1 per cent above CPI, to ensure long-term financial stability.



Without immediate intervention, councils could struggle to maintain existing homes and invest in new developments, exacerbating the housing crisis.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, warned that the situation is "untenable and unsustainable".

He added: "Specifically, the impact of the proposed five-year 'CPI plus 1 per cent' rent settlement needs to be looked at.

"The upcoming Spending Review is the opportunity to help give the sector the certainty it needs to build more homes and better look after its residents." ●

● See p7

Councils 'face £8bn funding gap'

Councils in England should be a major driver to boost local growth over the coming years, but could face a funding gap of more than £8 billion by 2028/29 without adequate funding, the LGA has warned.

In its submission to the Treasury ahead of the Spending Review in June, the LGA highlights the impact of not investing across the many critical council services that millions of people rely upon every day – such as looking after older and vulnerable adults, ensuring children gain access to vital special educational needs and disabilities provision, providing home-to-school transport, and temporary accommodation.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "Councils hold the key to public sector reform, which is a clear ambition of government. As leaders of their communities and major local employers, they must play a critical role in promoting sustainable and inclusive growth.

"We know that there are huge financial challenges ahead for government. However, sufficiently funding councils in the Spending Review would enable them to fully play their part in leading local growth priorities and unlocking the full potential of their local people, businesses and places.

"Local government has made huge savings and efficiencies over the past decade, and continues to innovate and transform services to get the best for residents and provide greater value for money.

"However, without adequate investment now, we risk not being able to deliver crucial

services that so many depend upon." ●

● See p10, Spending Review submission



News in brief

CSA protection plans

The number of formal protection plans for child sexual abuse is at the lowest level in 30 years, according to analysis by the CSA Centre. Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "Child sexual abuse is a terrible crime and one we must all work together to tackle. It is vital that professionals working with children, including in social care, the police, health, and the voluntary and community sector have high-quality training to enable them to identify and respond to potential signs of abuse rather than relying on verbal disclosures."

Housing directors

Local authority housing directors are to get their own national association in 2025/26. Cllr Adam Hug, the LGA's Housing Spokesperson, said: "In partnership with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the LGA is supporting the establishment of an Association of Directors of Housing. This will act as a focal point for the sector to collaborate, network and share best practice more effectively on a range of housing issues. The LGA and the association will announce further information about its launch date and how it will function in due course."

New communicator

The LGA has appointed Andrea Newman as its new Director of Communications and Engagement. Ms Newman, currently Strategic Director of Communications and Engagement at Surrey County Council, also has experience of government communications in Downing Street, the Cabinet Office and at the Ministry of Defence. She said: "As the sector faces significant change, the LGA's role in supporting and advocating for councils is more important than ever."



'Free' bus passes costing councils £452m

Councils had to spend nearly half a billion pounds last year to plug a shortfall in funding for free bus passes.

This was at the expense of lower fares and other transport services – such as free peak travel, community transport services, reduced fares and school transport – which could have helped more people into work and increased growth.

According to LGA analysis, an estimated £452 million came from councils' already overstretched budgets to meet the cost of the passes, which provide older and disabled people with free off-peak travel on all local bus services.

Councils in England are legally obligated to administer the national scheme and are responsible for reimbursing bus operators for journeys made by those with a pass.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Transport Spokesperson, said: "Free bus passes provide a vital lifeline for many in our communities, allowing vulnerable residents to go shopping, visit family and friends, and attend appointments. Councils want to keep this scheme running, but cannot keep finding nearly half a billion pounds a year from their overstretched budgets to make up the shortfall – money that could be used to help other people in need to get to work or college.

"By using the Spending Review to plug this gap and give councils the long-term funding they need, we can help government meet its objectives of breaking down barriers to employment and opportunity, while boosting inclusive economic growth." ●

Creative industries 'need more support'

The Government should consider providing further support for business advice services delivered by council libraries, in response to a call for bespoke finance support for small creative organisations, the LGA has said.

Creative organisations have a higher appetite for growth than businesses in other sectors, but are four times more likely to face obstacles accessing finance, according to research from Creative UK, the independent network for the UK's creative industries, and the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

Cllr Liz Green, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said:

"Councils strongly support this call for bespoke finance support for smaller creative industries, which can drive local growth. The Business and Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC) Network, run by the British Library and delivered through council library services, has a proven track record in supporting growth and development for small creative businesses and improving their access to finance.

"However, barriers still exist. The Government must consider further support for advice services such as the BIPC network, alongside bespoke options that help businesses to access finance and growth advice." ●

Government accepts Grenfell recommendations

Tough new rules on construction product safety, a new single construction regulator, and stronger protections for social housing tenants are among the building and fire safety reforms set out by the Government in its response to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

The response, published last month, confirms that all the

inquiry's recommendations will be met.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "The Grenfell Tower fire was a tragedy that must never be repeated, and our thoughts remain with those who lost their lives and those affected by the devastating events of June 2017.

"We have long called for an

overhaul of building safety regulations to ensure no-one has to live in fear about their safety, whether that is in the buildings in which they live, work or visit.

"We are pleased the Government has accepted the inquiry's recommendations.

"As we now act on these, it is crucial that councils and fire and rescue services are closely involved, given the leading role they play in fixing buildings and ensuring residents are safe." ●



£76m gap in temporary accommodation budgets

Changes in the allocation of the Homelessness Prevention Grant mean that councils are facing a £76 million shortfall in their temporary accommodation budgets, the LGA has warned.

In 2023/24, councils spent nearly £2.3 billion on temporary accommodation, with £1.06 billion covered by reserves or grant funding.

However, under new arrangements for 2024/25, at least 49 per cent of the £633 million Homelessness Prevention Grant must be allocated to prevention and relief activities, leaving only £322.83 million for temporary accommodation. This means there is a £76 million reduction compared with the previous year, forcing councils to plug the gap with already-stretched reserves.

The LGA has warned that the temporary accommodation subsidy gap – the shortfall

between actual accommodation costs and Department for Work and Pensions funding – was £204.5 million in 2022/23. Without urgent intervention, councils may struggle to fulfil their statutory housing obligations.

The LGA is calling on the Government to remove the ringfence on grant funding and increase the temporary accommodation subsidy to 90 per cent of the prevailing local housing allowance rate. This would ease financial pressures and allow councils to focus on preventing homelessness.

Cllr Adam Hug, the LGA's Housing Spokesperson, said: "While it is right to focus on prevention, this sudden shift in funding allocation without a suitable transition period risks exacerbating financial pressures. An uprating of the temporary accommodation subsidy is desperately needed to address the growing cost burden on councils." ●

More than 1.4 million homes 'left unbuilt'

More than 1.4 million homes with planning permission have been left unbuilt by developers since 2007, according to a report from the Institute for Public Policy Research thinktank.

Common reasons for this include developers wanting to increase the land's value before selling it on, and land banking to slow building rates and maintain high house prices.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "The LGA has long called for government action on the need to tackle slow build-out rates from some developers.

"To deliver the homes we need, government must work with councils and the housebuilding industry to ensure there is a suitable pipeline of sustainable sites, which, once allocated in a local plan and/or given planning permission, are indeed built out.

"Councils approve nine in 10 planning applications, but people cannot and do not live in planning permissions.

"Councils must be given greater powers to ensure prompt build out of sites with planning permission.

"They should also be given the support to ensure they have an up-to-date local plan so they can give certainty to residents and housebuilders." ●

News in brief

Supervised toothbrushing

A national programme of supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds in early years settings – including nurseries and primary schools – in the most deprived areas of England has been launched. Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Supervised toothbrushing is proven to improve children's oral health. This investment will help address health inequalities by supporting children in the most deprived areas to develop positive brushing habits, preventing tooth decay and reducing the need for hospital treatment. The flexibility in how the funding can be used is particularly appreciated, allowing councils to tailor programmes to best meet local needs."

Fewer get care

The increasing cost of paying staff has led to a fall in the number of people receiving publicly funded long-term care, according to The King's Fund Social Care 360 report. Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Local authorities and their care provider partners are under unprecedented financial pressure, exacerbated by inflation, rising demand, an increase in employer National Insurance contributions and workforce challenges. The Spending Review must urgently address a long-term funding plan for adult social care."

Youth vaping

The Government has commissioned a study to research the long-term health effects of vaping on young people's health and wellbeing. Councils have raised concerns over young people vaping and are pleased the Government set out measures to restrict the availability and marketing of vapes to children, said Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board. He added: "It is concerning that almost one in 10 secondary school students regularly or occasionally vape – the longer-term impacts of which are still unclear."

Councils 'critical to digital inclusion'

Millions of people are set to gain greater digital skills and get online, in a plan to tackle exclusion and boost economic growth.

The Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan will help those held back from improving their job prospects and accessing key services, including older and low-income households, who also face paying more for things such as home insurance, train travel and food compared with those who are online.

Cllr Abi Brown OBE, Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, said councils are critical to digital inclusion, running local initiatives such as digital skills improvement support and refurbishing old equipment to donate or lend to residents. She added: "Our world is increasingly digital by default, with public services being moved online.

"Digital skills, equipment and reliable connectivity, as well as the confidence to be online, are crucial to enable people to fully participate



in society and engage in education and employment.

"Given their role as local leaders, councils want to go much further, building on their work with local voluntary and community sector organisations to reach socially excluded groups." ●

Early years reform guidance published

The Government has published updated guidance supporting councils to ensure childcare providers make all additional charges clear and upfront to parents.

These include costs such as nappies, wipes or lunch, and a requirement that these charges must not be included as a condition for parents accessing their hours.

The Government says the guidance aims to ensure no family is priced out of the support they need and puts transparency at the heart of how the funded hours should be delivered.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "Making sure that every child can access their early years entitlements is vitally important if we are to achieve the Government's ambitions of getting

more children 'school ready' every year.

"We know that charging for consumables has made access to places more difficult for some families, with complex guidance making it difficult for councils to effectively challenge providers in this area. It is extremely helpful that guidance is now being clarified.

"Moving forward, we must make sure that both councils and providers are in a strong position to play their part in giving every child the best start.

"That includes using the Spending Review to fully fund early entitlements so that providers can deliver high-quality early education to every child, and making sure councils have the right levers, powers and resources to manage local childcare markets for the benefit of all children and families." ●

Support for those who serve

Consistent guidance is needed on the Armed Forces Covenant

The Armed Forces Covenant is a cornerstone of the UK's commitment to ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community – serving personnel, veterans, and their families – are treated fairly and supported in their transition to civilian life.

However, as highlighted by the LGA in our evidence session to the Commons' Defence Committee's inquiry on the covenant in February, delivering on this promise is not without its challenges.

Councils across the country are working tirelessly to uphold the covenant, but financial pressures and inconsistent guidance are creating significant hurdles.

The covenant, which was enshrined in law in 2011, aims to ensure that those who serve, or have served, in the Armed Forces, and their families, are not disadvantaged because of their military service. It covers key areas such as healthcare, education and housing, with councils playing a crucial role in its delivery through regional partnerships and dedicated 'covenant officers', who provide tailored support to veterans and their families.

Despite these efforts, the system is far from perfect.

Councils report significant challenges, particularly around inconsistent statutory guidance and a lack of top-down leadership from central government.

This has led to geographical disparities in how the covenant is implemented, with some areas offering robust support and others struggling to meet the needs of their Armed Forces communities.

For example, councils in areas with large military populations often have well-established networks, while those with smaller, or more dispersed, veteran populations face difficulties in raising awareness and accessibility.

Funding is another major issue. Councils are under severe financial strain, with inflation, wage pressures and rising demand for services creating a funding gap of £1.9 billion in 2025/26, rising to £4.0 billion in 2026/27, £6.0 billion in 2027/28 and £8.4 billion in 2028/29. This has made it increasingly difficult for councils to prioritise covenant work, especially when faced with competing statutory responsibilities.



The lack of dedicated funding for covenant officers has also been a recurring concern, with councils relying heavily on volunteers and fluctuating local budgets to maintain support services.

Councils have welcomed the possibility of extending the covenant's legal duty to central government and devolved administrations, which could help standardise delivery and reduce regional disparities.

However, any expansion must be accompanied by clear guidance, dedicated funding, and well thought out implementation plans. Without these, already stretched local services could face even greater pressure.

One area in which the Armed Forces Covenant could be expanded is social care, particularly for veterans with complex mental health needs or long-term care requirements.

Councils have also suggested extending the covenant to

cover childcare, employment support and criminal justice pathways, all of which are critical for helping veterans transition to civilian life.

Any expansion must be evidence-based and accompanied by sufficient resources to avoid overburdening councils.

The Armed Forces Covenant has undoubtedly made significant strides in supporting the Armed Forces community, but there is still much work to be done.

The LGA will continue calling for clearer national guidelines, dedicated funding and stronger collaboration between central and local government, to ensure that the covenant delivers on its promise. ●

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

Spending Review 2025

Councils need more funding to provide vital local services

To unlock the full potential of councils to support local communities and help deliver the Government's reform and growth agenda, the sector needs sufficient and sustainable funding.

Over the long term, there also needs to be a review of, and reform to, the overall revenue funding system for councils.

So says the LGA's submission to the Treasury ahead of the Government's Spending Review due on 11 June. The submission highlights the fundamental challenges facing councils in England, including that cost and demand pressures are rising faster than funding.

While inflation has fallen since its peak in 2022/23, the sector is still grappling with the huge resulting uplift in its cost base. Councils also continue to face wage pressures driven by increases in the National Living Wage, and recent changes to employer National Insurance contributions (NICs) rates and thresholds.

While the Government has provided £515 million for the direct costs to local authorities' wage bills associated with the NICs changes, the LGA estimates the direct costs will be £637 million, plus up to £1.1 billion in indirect costs from providers of outsourced or contracted-out services.

In addition to these economy-wide inflationary and wage pressures, there are individual service areas with cost and demand dynamics that are exerting higher cost pressures. These include children's social care, home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), adult social care, and homelessness services.

LGA analysis suggests councils could



face a funding gap of more than £8 billion by 2028/29 without adequate additional funding. If current cost and demand trends continue, by the end of 2028/29 these pressures would add £21.4 billion to the bill for council services since 2024/25 – a 29.8 per cent increase in service costs.

Without urgent action in the Spending Review, not only will many councils face impossible choices on which desperately needed services they can provide in the future, but the opportunity to boost growth and reform may also be missed.

The Spending Review's commitment to delivering public service reform to manage cost and demand pressures and deliver greater value for money, particularly in areas such as children's social care and SEND, will be crucial.

The sector is keen to work with the Government on service reform, and much of the LGA's submission focuses on this issue (see right). But reform alone will not address the scale of the cost and demand pressures faced by the sector, and there is genuine need for a larger funding quantum. ●

SR25: LGA recommendations

Local government finances

To fix the financial foundations of local government, councils need:

- a sustained increase in funding that recognises growing cost pressures across service areas
- sufficient additional funding to cover increases in the National Living Wage and changes to employer National Insurance contributions
- a review of the efficacy of Exceptional Financial Support
- a cross-party review of local government funding, including council tax and business rates
- consideration of alternative and additional forms of council funding
- the timely and transparent delivery of current commitments to finance reform, with proper transition arrangements.

Barriers to opportunity

Council support for children, young people and families is central to the Government's mission to remove barriers to opportunity. This requires:

- a new cross-government strategy to ensure all partners are working towards a shared ambition
- reform and long-term investment to address challenges facing council-backed services, including preventative services and placements for children in care
- urgent reform of the SEND system, with a focus on raising levels of mainstream inclusion
- the writing off of all 'high needs' SEND Dedicated Schools Grant deficits
- a nationwide rollout of family hubs and further investment in child health services
- sufficient powers, resources and levers for councils' statutory duty to ensure that families have access to high-quality early education and childcare.

Technology-led reform

To unlock the potential of a digitally enabled local government sector, the LGA wants:

- government to work with it to create a dedicated 'Local Government Centre for Digital Technology' within the LGA
- the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to work with it to address challenges to digital inclusion and connectivity, and empower communities digitally.

Kickstart growth

As leaders of place and as major local employers, councils have a critical and unique role in unlocking inclusive and sustainable growth.

The LGA is calling for:

- sufficient funding and flexibility so that all councils, including those in combined or strategic authority areas, can lead local growth priorities
- greater fiscal decentralisation, including mechanisms such as a tourist levy
- long-term consolidated investment in local transport infrastructure
- a stronger partnership with our members to deliver Get Britain Working White Paper reforms
- housing reforms, including on Right to Buy and homelessness
- actions to strengthen housing revenue accounts
- continued investment in the One Public Estate programme, Brownfield Land Release Fund and the Local Authority Housing Fund
- funding for a new, multi-year, council housebuilding, sector-led support programme
- uprating of temporary accommodation subsidy rates
- a sustainable funding model for the delivery of supported housing.

Public sector reform

Councils should be central to these important reforms, as there is clear evidence of the strong value for money of their preventative services. The LGA is calling for:

- investment in 'test and learn' approaches, workforce, and sector-led improvement
- recognition of the important connection between councils and the voluntary sector
- adequate resources for councils' long-term role in the welfare system, including a planned replacement for the Household Support Fund
- restoration of the public health grant to 2015/16 levels, with a review of its distribution and year-on-year increases.

Green energy

To accelerate towards net zero, the Government should adopt a comprehensive long-term, place-based strategy that reforms funding, planning and delivery to unlock the potential of councils as leaders and conveners, with housing, planning, waste and transport powers. This includes:

- consolidating and devolving funds from existing schemes into a Warm Homes Plan that delivers long-term investment in retrofit and a Local Power Plan that will scale community energy projects
- national backing of local transport decarbonisation plans, including demand-management schemes
- a rapid review of plans for the Emissions Trading Scheme extension to waste, to protect local services
- designing out carbon use across the economy
- integrating climate resilience into policymaking, supporting nature recovery and providing flexible flood-defence funding.

NHS and social care

Effective NHS reform cannot be realised without an equivalent, clear and urgent plan for adult social care reform, which tackles immediate pressures and their consequences as well as longer-term questions such as who pays for care. It also requires:

- place-based, personalised health services that address the root causes of health inequalities
- an immediate funding injection to stabilise the adult social care system
- scaled-up investment in tech-enabled care, particularly for those on lower incomes
- investment in adult social care prevention trailblazers, and funding for independent evaluation of existing and future preventative interventions
- funding and support to deliver the recommendations of the Skills for Care workforce strategy
- paid leave for unpaid carers.

Safer streets

Councils play a crucial role in promoting community cohesion, reducing reoffending, combating antisocial behaviour, tackling knife crime and countering extremism. But councils need:

- resources, alongside reform of the partnership landscape, to best deliver their role
- a long-term, unified funding stream for community safety, directly allocated to councils or community safety partnerships (CSPs)
- adequate powers for CSPs
- funding for preventative services to address childhood adversity and poor mental health.



This is a summary of the LGA's submission to the 2025 Spending Review. To read it in full, please visit www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/spending-review-2025

Principles of funding reform

A review of local government finance is long overdue

Late last year, the LGA, published 'Reforming the local government funding system in England'.

A joint report with Solace, the network for local authority chief executives and senior managers, and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, it contained suggestions for improvements to the current system and for longer-term reform.

In that report, we said that 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.

But there is growing evidence that the local government revenue funding system itself desperately needs reform, and a fresh urgency needs to be added to the search for new funding streams for local government.

When considering revenue sources

for councils, these should, when taken together, reflect a number of principles: sufficiency, buoyancy, fairness, efficiency, predictability, and transparency – and they should provide incentives.

They should also work with whatever structure emerges from the English Devolution White Paper. However, changes to local government structures are highly unlikely, by themselves, to address the deficit in ongoing revenue funding needed to sustain local services.

The Government's recent consultation, 'Local authority funding reform: objectives and principles', picked up many of the themes in the LGA report, including: updating the system for allocating funding; resetting the business rates retention system; and giving certainty over funding streams, such as the New Homes Bonus, as well as on sales, fees and charges reform.

In the LGA's response to the consultation, we suggested new funding

streams for councils could come from e-commerce levies and/or assigning each local area a proportion of nationally collected taxes, such as income tax, stamp duty, vehicle excise duty or inheritance tax.

It would be for local politicians, in partnership with local providers, to decide on priorities and the allocation of funding.

It is vital that any discussion on council funding focuses not just on how best to fund councils' current activities, but also considers whether there are other areas of existing public spending that would be best devolved to councils.

There was no mention of public health within the consultation, despite local government's hugely important role in improving healthy life expectancy. We said we look forward to seeing the public health grant announced at the same time as the local government finance settlement, and as part of a multi-year settlement.

Our response highlighted other service areas facing financial pressures that would benefit from reform, including internal drainage board levies, special educational needs and disabilities, housing revenue accounts, and capital financing.

We also commented on government proposals on relative-needs funding formulae, area cost adjustments, assumptions about council tax levels, and transitional arrangements, and reiterated our calls for competitive bidding and ring-fence funding.

The local authority funding system is out of date, opaque and overly complex. The LGA has long called for reform and, therefore, we welcome this review.

However, transitional mechanisms should provide sufficient funding to ensure that no council experiences a loss of income as a result of changes and updates to the way needs and resources are assessed. ●



i The Government's now closed consultation on local authority funding reform is available at [moredetails.uk/41Znj3c](https://www.moredetails.uk/41Znj3c). See [moredetails.uk/3Do0v3T](https://www.moredetails.uk/3Do0v3T) for the LGA's response and [moredetails.uk/3ROZVMn](https://www.moredetails.uk/3ROZVMn) for the joint report with Solace and CIPFA

Good conduct

The LGA has responded to a consultation on councillor standards



Councillor Abi Brown OBE (l) is Chairman of the LGA's Governance Working Group, and Councillor Marianne Overton MBE is Chair of the LGA's Civility in Public Life Steering Group

The Government is about to reform the councillor standards framework for local authorities in England, to strengthen powers.

The LGA's cross-party Civility in Public Life Steering Group and our Governance Working Group ran a significant consultation with the sector to develop our response.

Reforms must aim to create a culture that fosters respectful democratic debate, including robust challenge, and that places fairness, independence and natural justice at its heart if government hopes to create a system in which councillors, officers and the public can place their trust.

Clearly, the vast majority of councillors act with the best intentions and conduct themselves well in office. The large majority of breaches of the code of conduct are minor in nature.

However, we are not complacent and recognise that, on rare occasions, member behaviour can fall below the expected standards – and the current system is not equipped with the necessary tools to deal with some of the more challenging cases.

This can undermine public confidence and cause disruption of council business.

In the LGA's submission to the Government's consultation on reforming

the councillor standards framework, which closed last month, we proposed a strengthening and standardisation of the complaints-handling process, alongside the introduction of a more substantial sanction of suspension for up to six months – but only in rare cases of serious misconduct.

We felt strongly that the current system is too inconsistent for extraordinary powers of suspension to be introduced without significant safeguards and substantial reform to the complaints-handling process.

Feedback from the sector indicated that a much more standardised approach to codes of conduct, complaints handling and application of sanctions would be welcomed by councillors and officers alike, and that there was an appetite for suspension to be available as a sanction at local level.

Alongside proposals for greater standardisation and strong guidance, we were able to support many of the Government's proposals, including creating a new minimum prescribed code of conduct. This would require councils to maintain standards committees with voting independent members and chairs, and the introduction of suspension as a sanction for serious misconduct, alongside an independent appeals process.

However, feedback from the sector suggested significant concern with some of the Government's proposals.

Repeated poor behaviour can be disruptive and reputationally damaging for councils, but removing an elected person from public office is very serious.

We couldn't support disqualification as part of the local standards system, but



recognised that disqualification criteria in relation to criminality may not have kept pace with public sentiment and should be reviewed.

Interim suspension before a finding of a breach of the code represents a serious democratic deficit, risks a councillor's reputation, and is a sanction, even if they are later found not to have breached the code.

The LGA has long advocated for high standards in public office as a key element in maintaining trust and integrity in local government. In 2020, it was the LGA that produced the Model Code of Conduct that is now used in six out of 10 councils.

We hope the Government will work hand in hand with councils to ensure the new standards framework is fit for purpose and supports an environment that allows councils to thrive and deliver for their local communities. ●

“Reforms must aim to create a culture that fosters respectful democratic debate, including robust challenge”

i ‘Strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England’ can be viewed at [moredetails.uk/3Xp2kE7](https://www.local.gov.uk/moredetails.uk/3Xp2kE7). The LGA's response is at www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses

Local leadership

Councils are key to combined authorities

Since the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December, the LGA has been working at pace to respond to the opportunities and risks it presents, and to support our member councils as they do the same.

You can read more about our support offer for councils and regions embarking

on devolution and local government reorganisation in the panel, opposite.

Our position is clear: we want every council in England to have the ability to secure devolution that works for them, their local economies and their residents.

The devolution of powers and resources can play a huge role in promoting inclusive

economic growth, creating jobs and improving public services. In a very centralised country, moving funding and power from Whitehall to local leaders is needed.

Much emphasis has been placed on the leadership of mayors, but crucial to the success of established combined authorities – and future ‘strategic’ authorities –

is the local leadership provided by their constituent councils.

Below, we hear from leaders whose councils are members of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) about their roles in decision-making and delivery, the pros (and cons) of being part of a combined authority, and what difference it has made locally to residents. ●

‘Strength in numbers’

Councillor Garry Perry (Con) is Leader of Walsall Council

Being a member of the West Midlands Combined Authority puts us on a platform of positive economic change.

As a collective voice, we can put the region firmly on the map and we’re ambitious in terms of what we can achieve by working together.

We’re reaping some rewards of this joint work in Walsall. Currently, we’re in the middle of a £1.5 billion regeneration programme that will transform our town for the better, and create 4,000 new jobs and build more than 1,000 new homes.

The setup isn’t perfect. For me, it’s about ensuring that all seven members of the authority are seen and treated as equals,



on a level-playing field – nobody wants to be the poor relation.

There can be complex, bureaucratic processes to tackle when it comes to different funding opportunities, which, in my view, need to be streamlined if we want to influence central government effectively.

I will always approach everything with a Walsall-first mindset, with people and place at the core.

But I’m not naïve enough to believe that some issues we face in Walsall are problems we face alone, and, with that, there is great strength in numbers.

‘A focus on devolution’

Councillor Stephen Simkins (Lab) is Leader of City of Wolverhampton Council

The WMCA is an extension of the regional metropolitan authorities that founded it. It focuses on moving resources and control from Westminster to the West Midlands to benefit local people. Mayor Richard Parker’s latest devolution deal can help deliver that.

A big advantage of the WMCA is improving transport and infrastructure, making it easier to access jobs, cut travel times and support employers. Our £150 million Wolverhampton Interchange – bringing bus, rail and metro into one commuter hub – is a great example of this.

The WMCA is tackling skills and employment, acting as a catalyst for regional collaboration and leading plans for a ‘targeted to need’ system.



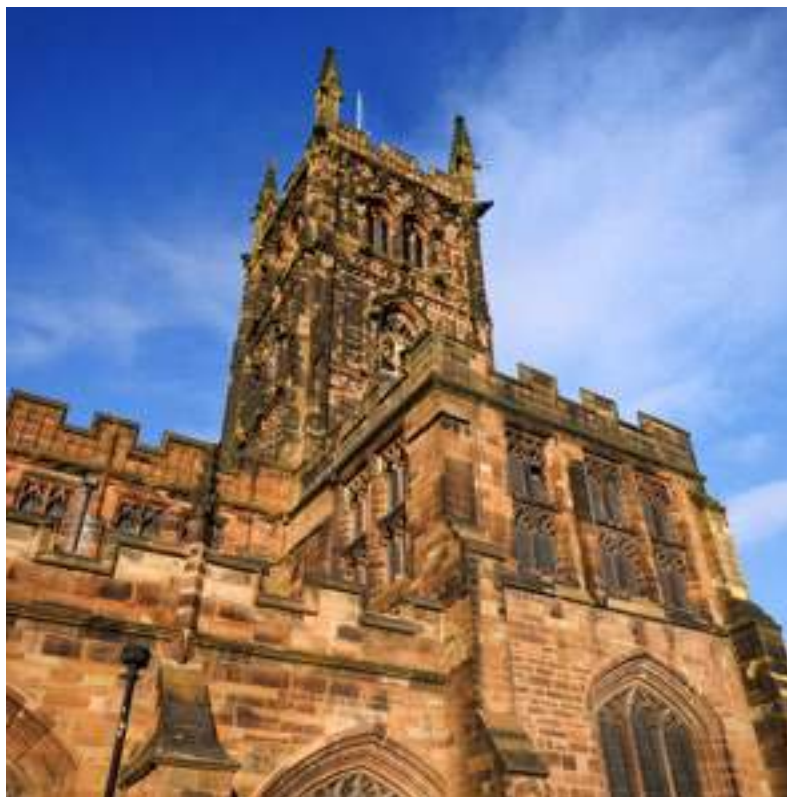
Support from the combined authority is also helping in financially challenging times, with council budgets already overstretched.

But more needs to be done. We need to get slicker with housing and land regeneration, especially given the Government’s target to build 1.5 million homes. We must unlock regional funding to deliver key local housing schemes. We have a ‘brownfield first’ commitment and numerous sites raring to go, but need regional support through viability gap funding.

We are stronger together and, with shared priorities, can bring positive change.



The footpath over the Walsall Canal in Walsall



St Peter's Church, Wolverhampton

Support for reorganisation

The LGA has a strong track record of supporting councils to address specific challenges at all stages of devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR).

During this period in which councils are developing their business cases, we will be sensitive to different views when considering what support we can provide.

Where all authorities in an area proposed for reorganisation or devolution agree that they would like to receive support, we will discuss with them a package targeted to their needs. The LGA's regional teams lead on this improvement offer (see [moredetails.uk/4iJkw3F](https://www.local.gov.uk/moredetails.uk/4iJkw3F)) and will continue to revise it based on feedback, adjusting it to be appropriate for individual councils or groups of councils.

Where there is agreement across all councils potentially affected, our offer includes:

- facilitation of discussions between authorities to inform the development of proposals
- 'top team' workshops for senior political and managerial leaders, to develop a shared vision and approach to plans for change
- 'critical friend' challenge and support, including brokering 'buddy' and mentoring arrangements for senior political and managerial leaders
- bespoke support to plan for governance arrangements in new authorities.

Our offer also includes:

- the LG Inform+ tool, mapping demographic data to the new geographic footprint to support service and financial modelling and planning
- HR and employment law advice (for example, on TUPE-related issues)
- bespoke support on financial planning and the technical finance implications of LGR.

Our universal offers are adjusted to be relevant to local context and the changing local government context.

For example, corporate or finance peer challenges can help identify issues that should be considered and addressed in preparing for LGR in relation to leadership, governance, finance and capacity, and to focus on readiness for LGR.

We have Leadership Essentials programmes specifically on devolution and LGR, and with content adjusted where appropriate to be relevant to that context; plus action learning sets and development programmes for officers leading transformation planning and programme management.

i For more information on the support outlined here, and additional support available from the LGA, please visit our devolution hub at www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub

Promoting gender equality

The LGA's Be a Councillor campaign provides specific support for women



Councillor Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA

This year's International Women's Day theme, 'Accelerate Action for gender equality', challenges us to call out the sexism, gender stereotyping and misogyny that have been on the increase in recent years.

This is about women standing up for ourselves and about men acting as allies and challenging poor behaviour.

One way of doing this is through sharing stories of women's achievements and how good practice can support them to succeed (see below, right and over page).

Women bring different perspectives to leadership. We are often intuitive, great at juggling different things and take a pragmatic approach, which makes us well placed to solve problems and represent others.

I had been working for almost 15 years on supporting other women into leadership positions when I was asked if I had ever considered putting myself forward for election.

The opportunity to become a councillor

was an obvious complement to my existing skills and I am very proud to be a female leader of my council.

I would encourage any woman who has doubts about becoming a councillor to be brave and go for it. If you are thinking about it, you are already taking a step in the right direction.

I have received continuous support from my local council, Cheshire West and Chester, since I first got elected.

At the time I was elected, our democratic services team put together a fantastic induction programme, with different training events and a buddy system with a member of their team for new councillors.

I have also had great peer support from other female councillors.

The LGA's Be a Councillor campaign also encourages and supports a diverse range of people to become councillors, with specific support for women provided by our campaign partners Elect Her (see www.elect-her.org.uk) and 50:50 Parliament (see 5050parliament.co.uk).

Councils can also benefit from our support to run their own local Be a Councillor campaigns. Check our website to find out more, at www.local.gov.uk/be-councillor. ●

'We can make amazing things happen'

Councillor Sophie Cox (Lab) is Leader of Worthing Borough Council

I've been a councillor on Worthing Borough Council since May 2023 and took over as leader in July 2024.

Before having my children, I worked in press and communications for a different council. I then took a career break to raise my three children and started volunteering in my community.

When my youngest started school, in 2022, I was encouraged to stand for election. At the time, I was mentoring teenagers struggling in school, and it felt like the right moment

to take on a new challenge. Becoming a councillor offered the flexibility to still be there for my children – now aged seven, nine and 11 – while allowing me to get back into work.

The past 19 months have been a whirlwind of learning and opportunities, and it's such a great feeling to be able to shape the future of our community – for my children and the generations to come.

Balancing council work with family life is a juggle – attending evening committee meetings, as well as drop-offs to Brownies and the kids'

swimming lessons – but I set boundaries around school runs for non-essential meetings and we manage to make it work.

I would encourage anyone to stand as a councillor. It takes some resilience, and I had to develop a thick skin quickly, but I've learned not to let criticism hold me back.

I always rejected the idea that 'things will never change' and if more people enter politics for the right reasons, we can make amazing things happen.



'We have much work to do'

Councillor Jindy Atwal (Lib Dem)
is a Member of Dorset Council



Growing up, I never envisioned a career in politics, especially as a working-class female of Indian heritage in a landscape with scarce representation.

The intersectionality of my identity made my presence on Dorset Council seem unlikely. Yet, here I am!

Encouraged by Cllr Vikki Slade, MP for Mid Dorset and North Poole, and supported by the wonderful people of Dorset, I proudly began representing my ward in May 2024.

International Women's Day (IWD) is significant to me as it celebrates the talented women whose contributions are often overlooked.

It also serves as a reminder of the adversities faced by girls and women affected by misogyny, grooming, and domestic abuse. As highlighted by the Dorset Pineapple Trust, there remains an urgent need to protect and

empower vulnerable girls in our communities.

Each year, as Jess Phillips MP reads the heartbreaking list of women lost to violence, I am left grappling with the stark reality that we have much work to do.

I want my daughter and her generation to feel safe from violence in their homes. This IWD, let's strive for meaningful change.

I hope to use my position on the council to help as many girls and women as possible, serving as a role model and as a force for practical change.

If young girls can see someone like me – from a working-class background and a home where domestic abuse was prevalent – now thriving in a public role, I hope it may inspire them.

I extend my deepest thanks to the trailblazing women before me, who forged a path to enable women like me to flourish. I hope I can do the same for the next generation of girls.

'A little council that does big things'

Councillor Anna Bailey (Con) is Leader of East Cambridgeshire District Council

I first became a district councillor in 2007, when a friend of mine said: "You'd be great; it's only a couple of evenings a month!"

Fast forward to 2025 and it has become a 24/7 passion, and I find myself having been leader of the council for nearly six years.

I am proud of our little council, which does big things; we have frozen our share of council tax bills for 12 years while still delivering great services.

We have funded lots of new community projects, such as youth centres, a theatre, community orchards, improvements to village halls, new roads and car parks, and genuinely affordable homes reserved for local people. We also have a specific campaign supporting hedgehogs, voted for by residents.

I served for eight years

on Cambridgeshire County Council, where I was the Lead Member for Adult Social Care and had the most amazing chance to trial my vision for a whole new, very local, method of supporting people in our communities.

The 'Neighbourhood Cares' work endures to this day and I hope can become part of the nationwide solution to the challenges we face in social care.

Being a councillor is hard work and a big responsibility – sometimes it drives me mad! But it is exciting and incredibly fulfilling.

To be the representative of the people is a special thing, and when times are tough, as they can be, I always remember that it is the people that put me there and that I exist to speak up for them. What an amazing privilege!



'Still a very male-dominated space'

Councillor Anastasia Wiest is Leader of the Green Group on Manchester City Council

I was elected in May 2023, and became group leader in November 2024. My two fellow Greens on the council were elected in the two years prior.

It is hard being such a small group on a huge council (there are 96 councillors in total) and, because we are all relatively new, we don't have the same wealth of knowledge about how the council works as the larger parties.

My focus since being leader has been to ask for briefings on everything – from selective

licensing to devolution – to bolster my group's understanding of how all of these systems work.

Politics is an interesting arena; culturally, it's still a very male-dominated space, with a lot of shoulder squaring and finger pointing.

All consequential decisions are made behind closed doors and public meetings are there to give everyone the opportunity for political point scoring.

The system is not very democratic, and it's based on a black/white

mentality, without much room for nuance.

I'm one of the youngest councillors in Manchester, at 28, and the average age of a councillor in England is around 65.

I hope that more young people, especially more young women, will get involved in politics and change the culture – to make it more collaborative and more deliberative, which is what we really need if we're going to find consensus on the big issues such as climate change and housing justice.



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Councils have an important role to play in promoting local democracy and participation. Most undertake activity to increase democratic engagement, promote the role of a councillor and encourage people to stand for election.

The LGA's Be a Councillor campaign shares good practice that can help with laying the foundations for an inclusive council and encouraging a diverse pool of people to consider becoming councillors.

For example, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham established a Disabled Peoples' Commission, bringing together councillors, residents and officers to improve disabled people's experiences. It used co-production to make its new Civic Campus accessible, which led to better engagement with residents and encouraged a disabled member of the commission to go on to become mayor.

Lived experience has led to positive change for how

council meetings are run – such as the introduction of British Sign Language interpreters and encouraging councillors to stop heckling – making the environment more accessible.

In Torbay, a councillor proposed expanding the carer's allowance policy to allow any councillor (including reserves) – rather than only named committee members – to claim for attending a meeting on council business. This led to more participation from carers and disabled people, and better engagement with the disability community.

Powys County Council staff and councillors travel up to two hours for council meetings because of the size and rurality of the authority. A motion raised by a councillor enabled remote meetings, and the Welsh Government's decision to retain this option post-pandemic has had a positive impact. The council reports that remote meetings have had a positive impact in Powys on

Improving councillor diversity

How culture change and community outreach can make a difference

candidate recruitment and councillor diversity, especially for disabled people, young people in employment, and parents.

Many councils also run local Be a Councillor events, raising awareness of what councils and councillors do, the practicalities of the role, key election processes, skills and attributes, and signposting to political support. Councils take varying approaches to suit local need.

For example, Kent's 'Question Time'-style panels provided inspiration and information from councillors with varying roles, responsibilities and experience, as well as an open Q&A, all of which used the speaking timer for a practical insight into the council chamber.

Alongside its Be a Councillor event, Islington put on sessions – including for students, care-experienced young people and residents with learning disabilities – to help people to

understand how to get their voice heard in local decision-making.

Lancashire set up stalls at its event for people to access other services at the same time, such as voter registration and voter ID; while Tower Hamlets ran an open event as well as a bespoke women's event, which included councillor speakers and external speakers such as 50:50 Parliament.

Key to Be a Councillor events in councils has been broad outreach to all communities – for example, via colleagues in the voluntary and community sector. As a result, they have been well attended, with highly engaged audiences from across communities interested in the role and staying on afterwards to support and network with each other.

Be a Councillor events can serve as one of many positive touchpoints residents can have with councils, sharing information and strengthening community. ●

“Key to Be a Councillor events in councils has been broad outreach to all communities”



Cllr Lana Hemsall (Con), of Broadland District Council and Norfolk County Council, speaking with police officers

i The LGA's Leadership and Talent Team provides tailored support and resources for officer and member development – please email beacouncillor@local.gov.uk

Demystifying AI

The LGA has created a new video series for councils



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

From council chambers to frontline delivery, artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer just a possibility; it's becoming part of local government's present reality.

The LGA's new 'AI Unpacked' video series sets out to make AI easier for local councils to understand. Councils need the right tools and knowledge to make informed decisions about when and how to adopt AI technologies.

Our 'State of the Sector' report on AI, published last year, reveals that – while interest in AI is growing among councils

“Councils need the right tools and knowledge to make informed decisions about when and how to adopt AI technologies”

– questions remain about governance, ethics and practical implementation.

Most councils report being in exploration phases, rather than full deployment. For example, some are deploying virtual assistants to handle routine enquiries, giving staff more time to tackle complex cases. Others are examining predictive tools that spot patterns in service demand earlier than traditional analysis methods.

Taking a measured approach makes sense. Behind the buzzwords and optimism lies a technology that requires thoughtful implementation.

When applied effectively, AI tools can enhance service delivery and resource management. When implemented poorly, they risk reinforcing existing inequalities or making flawed recommendations that impact vulnerable residents.

Cutting through technical complexity is essential for elected members who oversee strategic direction, senior officers managing implementation, and frontline staff using new tools.

Meaningful oversight requires understanding of core concepts, ensuring AI is used to genuinely improve residents' lives through better council services.

Recognising this, the LGA has created 'AI Unpacked', a new series of animated videos that explain complex AI concepts simply and accessibly. Each video tackles a fundamental aspect of AI relevant to local government operations.

The series explores questions at the heart of responsible AI adoption.

What exactly is artificial intelligence? How might councils practically apply these technologies? What role does data quality play? How can we ensure human judgement remains central to decision-making?

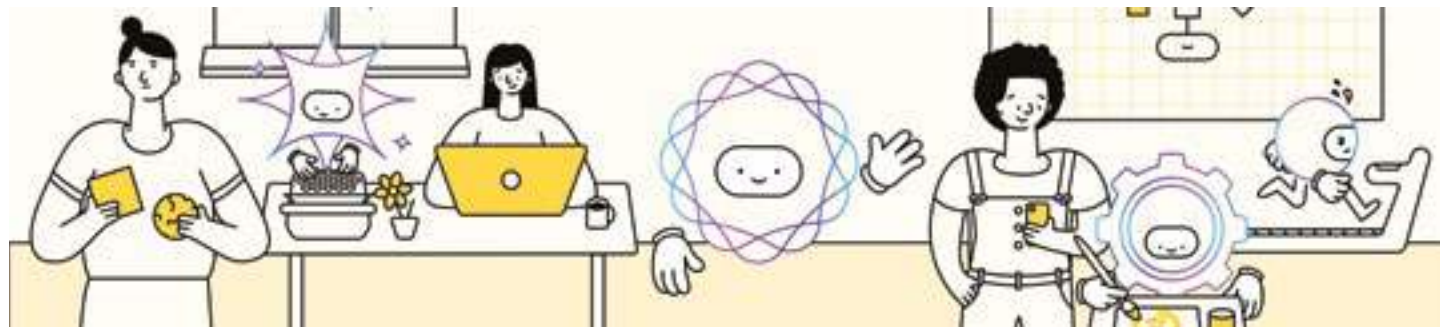
Our three-minute animations bring complex AI concepts to life with real-world council examples, to help viewers build their knowledge and feel more confident.

As councils face unprecedented financial pressures alongside increasing service demands, thoughtful technology adoption becomes increasingly vital.

By building shared understanding across political, executive and operational roles, authorities can make informed choices about where AI might genuinely add value – and where human judgement remains irreplaceable.

We hope you enjoy watching the 'AI Unpacked' videos, and please share these with your colleagues. They form part of the LGA's wider sector support offer on digital and technology, available at www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology. ●

i See www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology/ai-unpacked for our AI explainer videos. 'Local government state of the sector: AI' can be read in full at www.local.gov.uk/publications/state-sector-artificial-intelligence





Kevin Hollinrake MP is Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Local government is the beating heart of our communities. It is the councillor knocking on doors, the staff working tirelessly behind the scenes and the many services that shape the day-to-day lives of people across the country.

Yet, too often, Westminster sidelines local government in national debates, despite the vital role it plays in delivering essential public services and driving local economic growth.

As Shadow Secretary of State for Local Government, my mission – with my shadow team of David Simmonds, Paul Holmes, James Jamieson and Jane Scott, who bring with them a wealth of experience of local government – is to ensure that our councils are empowered with the resources, support and autonomy they need to thrive.

Councils are not just service providers; they are the very foundations upon which communities build their futures. This highlights why the Government's plans for local government reorganisation are so concerning.

We are very concerned that Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner's goal is to make local government less accountable to the people and more accountable to her – that she intends to strip local decision-making away from the people who understand their areas best and create a new tier of Orwellian-sounding 'strategic authorities' that are closer to her and Whitehall.

The unfortunate truth is that, despite the protestations of my party, we must recognise that local government reorganisation is going to happen.

That is why we have given our support to local Conservative leaders who, backed into a corner, have joined the 'priority pipeline' scheme to make the best out of this rushed Whitehall diktat.

We are also concerned, like many local leaders, that the perceived cost savings



Empowering councils to thrive

from local government reorganisation should not be used to squeeze council spending further.

The recent local government finance settlement has already placed huge pressure on a large number of, predominantly rural, local authorities through the scrapping of the Rural Services Delivery Grant, and a new way to distribute the extra monies for social care, with councils expected to pick up the slack through further council tax rises.

While we welcome the Government's move to multi-year funding settlements, more must be done to alleviate the uncertainty surrounding local government finance.

The Government should provide greater clarity around how new burdens – through legislation such as the Renters' Rights and

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bills – will be funded, and councils must not be punished for keeping council tax low for local residents.

Any 'fair funding' review must allocate resources according to need, rather than simply deprivation.

We are still at the early stages of a new Parliament and local government will probably look very different in five years' time, with new challenges and demands to meet. Over the months and years ahead, the shadow team will work constructively with the Government when it gets things right, but hold it firmly to account when it gets things wrong.

We are committed to engaging and listening to the sector as we begin to develop solutions to the deep structural challenges facing local government. ●

GROUP LEADERS



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

Planning reforms – the good, the bad and the ugly

I had got my hopes up that we had moved away from government diktats and demonising of councils, but the language being used around the Government's proposed planning reforms is just that.

Council planning committees are in the firing line. How many times do we need to remind government that councils approve nine out of 10 planning applications that come before them?

On the one hand, the Government's

proposals include some of the LGA's long-term asks, such as making it easier for councils to purchase vacant land for housebuilding, pledging to increase planning capacity, investing in infrastructure and speeding up its delivery.

However, there remain concerns around how it will ensure councils – which know their areas best and what they need – remain at the heart of the planning process. The democratic role of councillors in decision-making is essential.

Planning committees make decisions on only a small percentage of applications each year – and those typically involve larger or more controversial schemes that require greater scrutiny by those who represent their communities. A top-down national scheme with no reference to local authorities of different types and geographies is a recipe for disaster.

A recent survey by the LGA found that more than 96 per cent of decisions were delegated and made by officers in the second quarter of 2024.

"The town hall, not Whitehall, is best placed to decide on where development goes"

Our villages, towns and cities could be littered with 'Angela Rayner's eyesores', with no reference to local communities, landscapes and street scenes. The town hall, not Whitehall, is best placed to decide where development goes.

If the Government is serious about putting communities in charge, it could start by amending permitted development rights so councils can ensure truly affordable housing is not excluded from any permission.

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

A strategic approach



Councillor Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA

As first was going to press, the LGA was due to publish a new strategy – as well as an accompanying financial plan – to guide our work over the next few years.

Our strategy is about ensuring that every service we provide, every policy we champion, and every improvement we drive delivers real value to you, our members, and enables you to continue delivering the very best for your residents.

We will continue to work with you on how our new strategy, and supporting business and financial plans, will ensure we remain relevant, responsive and ambitious for the sector.



In that vein, we continue to lobby on your behalf to influence the outcome of the Government's Spending Review on 11 June, and you can read a summary of the LGA's submission in this edition (p10).

Over the past few weeks, we have highlighted the financial pressures councils face in respect of the vital local services they provide, including

support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, temporary accommodation, free bus passes, adult social care, and council housing.

At the latest Leaders' Council, held in Essex earlier this month, the LGA and local leaders discussed devolution and local government reorganisation with Local Government and Devolution Minister Jim McMahon, and Lords Minister for Housing and Local Government Baroness Taylor.

Key pressures around councils' early years provision were also raised with Stephen Morgan MP, the Early Education Minister, who highlighted the impact of high-quality early years education and how councils are central to securing the Government's ambition of getting the best start in life for our children and young people.

Collaborative conversations such as these are essential for driving positive change at local and national level.



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

Delivering on 1.5m new homes

The Government continues to deliver on its flagship commitment to construct 1.5 million new homes within this Parliament, having set out to bolster resources, streamline decision-making and promote local growth with an expansive package of housing interventions that will empower local areas and accelerate delivery of high-quality homes.

In our daily interactions with residents, we see where 14 years of mismanagement have left the housing situation: rising temporary accommodation numbers; families in poor-quality housing; and rising rents driving cost-of-living pressures.

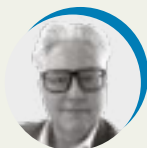
"We see where 14 years of mismanagement have left our housing situation"

This Government has started the vital work of change, with the recent unveiling of plans for: the next generation of New Towns, which received more than 100 proposals; the New Homes Accelerator, unblocking challenging developments to free up 20,000 homes, with a further 700,000 within scope; and an £800 million boost to the Affordable Homes Programme.

Growth is the Government's number one priority, and ensuring people have access to affordable, high-quality housing is at the heart of it.

With the Planning and Infrastructure Bill providing further impetus, I welcome the Government's acknowledgment of local government's central role, with the extra £100 million to bolster local planning resources accompanying new powers in the English Devolution White Paper.

This is a long-term endeavour, but we are already seeing the benefits of this Government's ambition.



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

One of the hardest budgets to set

I have been a councillor since 2002 and this has been one of the most challenging budget processes I have been through. Why, one might ask?

Of course, pressures in social services have exacerbated our budgets over recent years, but this year we've also had to contend with Labour's unexpected rise in employer National Insurance contributions (NICs) – unexpected in that Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer made it clear that taxation, including National Insurance, wouldn't increase under Labour.

As Cllr Tim Oliver OBE, Chairman of the County Councils Network, has pointed out, from the perspective of non-metropolitan local authorities "this was the worst settlement in years".

We all know the specific spend pressure the increase in NICs has placed on our respective councils' finances. Frankly, it is money I'd rather our councils be putting into road resurfacing, more fly-tipping enforcement, or flooding alleviation.

"We've had to contend with Labour's unexpected rise in employer NICs"

We got a mere compensation grant from the Treasury to cover some of these new costs, but it didn't touch the surface.

In response to a recent Written Question in the House of Lords, the Government wouldn't confirm that the grant would be renewed next year, only that it would be a matter for the upcoming Spending Review.

The real hit on councils will come in 2026/27 without this grant, and the hit will be seismic, mark my words!

GROUP LEADERS



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

Holding each other to account

Elected from within their local communities, and tasked with making decisions that affect the whole community, it is right that councillors are held accountable for their conduct and integrity while fulfilling their role.

The Government recently consulted on strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England, and as Chair of the LGA Civility in Public Life Steering Group, I worked with the LGA's Governance Working Group on the LGA's response (see **p13**).

"A reformed standards system must not create a chilling effect on democratic speech"

The response acknowledges that a councillor standards system that promotes high standards of conduct and behaviour is a key factor in ensuring high-quality decision-making and local democracy.

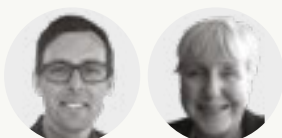
But the vast majority of councillors act with the best intentions and do display high standards of conduct.

Members felt strongly that the current system is too inconsistent and too open to false accusations to introduce extraordinary powers of suspension, as proposed by government, without significant safeguards and major changes to how complaints against councillors are handled.

A successful standards framework should set out clear expectations, enshrine freedom of speech, and clarify when councillor conduct is in the scope of the code of conduct.

A reformed standards system must not create a chilling effect on democratic speech and should recognise the mandate of councillors to represent their residents' views and hold each other to account. ●

A sustainable future for Welsh local government



Councillor Darren Price (Plaid) and Councillor Mary Ann Brocklesby (Lab) are WLGA Members of the Independent Working Group on Sustainable Local Government for the Future

Councils are the foundation of our communities. From providing social care and housing to maintaining roads and parks, they play an essential role in daily life. However, as demands on local services grow, we must consider what it is local government needs to remain sustainable for the future.

Local authorities have always adapted to challenges – demonstrating resilience, innovation and an unwavering commitment to serving their communities – but pressures are mounting. To ensure local government continues to thrive, we must proactively find solutions.

That is why an Independent Working Group on Sustainable Local Government for the Future has been established,

as a partnership between the WLGA, Wales Centre for Public Policy, and other key stakeholders.

This group brings together experienced local leaders, independent experts and researchers, to examine how we can create a stronger, more resilient system.

It is not just about identifying problems – it is about finding practical, evidence-based solutions that will help shape a sustainable future for Welsh councils.

One of the core issues the group will explore is financial sustainability.

While recent funding increases may have provided relief for some councils, they do not go far enough to address the challenges they face. After a decade of austerity, councils need long-term solutions.

Councils need the ability to plan effectively, rather than continually reacting to short-term pressures.

The group will consider what fair and sustainable funding could look like, ensuring local government has the certainty it needs to invest in communities, services and economic development.

Governance and accountability will also be key areas of focus.



River Tawe at Swansea

Strong local leadership, transparency, and the ability of councils to respond flexibly to local needs are fundamental to a modern and effective local government system.

The working group will examine how governance structures can be strengthened to empower councils, ensuring they remain responsive, efficient and focused on delivering for residents.

Beyond finances and governance, local government must also be at the forefront of addressing some of the biggest challenges facing society today.

Whether it is tackling the housing crisis, responding to climate change or delivering social care, councils are uniquely placed to lead.

With the right support and reforms, they can continue to drive meaningful change and make a tangible difference in people's lives.

The work of the independent working group will be instrumental in shaping this future. Its findings will help set out a vision for a more sustainable local government model – one that allows councils to thrive, innovate, and meet the needs of their communities for generations to come.

This is a pivotal moment for local government in Wales. If we get this right, we will not only safeguard vital services, but also create a stronger, more resilient system that delivers for everyone.

By working together – local leaders, government and communities – we can ensure that councils remain at the heart of Welsh life, continuing to serve, support and strengthen the places we call home. ●



Cardiff Bay, with the city centre in the background

Bookings are open for the WLGA's annual conference from 18-19 June, see www.wlga.wales

Devolution must strengthen police accountability



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

The Government has big plans for more devolution in England, to empower local decision-making on behalf of communities.

It also has big plans for policing across England and Wales, and colleagues and I are working closely with the Home Office, and others in the sector, to shape those changes.

Perhaps uniquely, police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and police, fire and crime commissioners (PFCCs) are affected by both programmes of reform.

PCCs and their equivalents embody localism, enabling communities to help shape their local area. We are elected to act as the public's voice in policing – a single, visible and accountable person who sets out local priorities on crime and policing, holding our police force accountable for delivering on them.

A core aspect of the PCC's role is convening local partners from other sectors – local authorities, health, education, charities – to identify and act on the root causes of offending. Together, we find effective and efficient ways of reducing crime – for example through cross-sector diversion schemes for



youngsters at risk of being drawn into criminal behaviour.

Learning from our deputy mayor colleagues, we know the opportunities further devolution brings for increasing the levers we can pull and enhancing the preventative work we do to keep communities safe.

On devolution, change is happening quickly.

The Government has announced that Cumbria, Cheshire and Warrington, Norfolk and Suffolk, Greater Essex, Sussex and Brighton, and Hampshire and Solent will have elections for new mayors by May 2026.

Regardless of structural and procedural reform to how it is delivered, it is vital the locally elected link with policing be retained – for the public to have a say in how they are policed.

There are already mayors and deputy mayors who have responsibility for policing and

crime, along with fire and rescue services, so we know that model works successfully alongside PCCs and PFCCs in other areas, and we will support its expansion to new areas of England.

PCCs perform a key role in holding chief constables to account.

Along with acting as the safeguard in the system to the considerable powers police hold over their fellow citizens, we ensure forces understand the need to build relationships with the communities they serve, while enforcing the law.

If we are to improve standards and, crucially, rebuild public trust and confidence in the police, devolution must ensure this is strengthened, and that scrutiny of chief constables is not reduced as areas move from a PCC or PFCC model to that of a mayor.

The role of a PCC is imbued with a singular capacity to bring together partners

to deliver for the public based on local need. We commission and fund services that support victims as they recover and are faced with navigating their way through a complex and protracted criminal justice process.

Funding and delivery of these services must not be disrupted during the process of change, and we will do everything possible to ensure a smooth transition in the areas impacted.

Ultimately, these changes must be of benefit to the public. To ensure that is the case, PCCs are fully committed to engaging at national and local level so that their valuable views and experience help shape the future for English devolution. ●

i To find out more about the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, visit www.apccs.police.uk

A vision for future growth



Councillor Phillippa Williamson (Con)
is Leader of Lancashire County Council

This year's Convention of the North provided a landmark moment for leaders, industry and policymakers in the region to come together as one and set out the North's vision for future growth.

Our region is rightly ambitious about the opportunities ahead and used last month's convention to show how the North is perfectly positioned to lead the way.

As proud host of the convention, Lancashire County Council is at the very heart of this evolving story, as the North steps up to the challenges facing the country. As a region, it remains a place that punches above its weight in terms of innovation, trade performance, and the clusters of business excellence that drive our economy.

Collectively, we know our region has the capability, persistence and grit to make something truly amazing happen.

In Lancashire, we are keenly aware of the way our economy and residents interact with the wider North, and the impact on UK plc. For example, BAE Systems' Air business employs around 12,000 people across its two sites in Lancashire but supports almost 70,700 jobs across the UK, in highly skilled roles including combat air design, engineering, support and training.

This work contributed more than £5 billion to the UK's gross domestic product, plus an additional £2.6 billion in exports – a figure that has doubled since 2016 – and a further £220 million to the UK government through tax revenues.

In February, the Lancashire Combined County Authority was established, with growth and economic development central to our devolution deal. Real powers and responsibilities on transport



Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner addresses this year's Convention of the North

and adult skills came quickly in the wake of establishing the new authority.

The creation of our new Lancashire Business Board, and our work to bring forward a growth plan – the consultation on which was launched at the Convention of the North – have crystallised our thinking on where we have the potential to deliver a step-change in our economic base, which, in turn, can deliver national growth and high-quality jobs for the future of our residents.

Over the past four months, we – alongside mayors, leaders, businesses and stakeholders from across the North – have also established a plan for how we can build on the opportunities of devolution to support the UK Government's growth mission through a northern growth model. This would combine investment in the sectors that will power the future global economy with investment in infrastructure and people.

These game-changers are focused on the specific opportunities the North has to lead growth for the UK, both at home and internationally, as well as address the infrastructure, labour market and health-

related issues that have prevented our people and places from realising their full potential for too long.

They include:

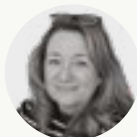
- connecting the North through a transformed rail system
- making the North a global leader in clean energy investment
- creating a cluster in the North of artificial intelligence (AI) excellence
- combining cutting-edge research with place-based prevention of ill-health, to drive growth and reform
- investing in the North's place, cultural and natural assets.

Here in Lancashire, we believe there are exciting times ahead. We remain committed to the future of the North, and to creating the conditions in which businesses can thrive and our residents have the best possible life chances moving forward. ●

See **www.conventionofthenorth.org.uk** to find out more about the Convention of the North



A culture of success



Julie Firth is Director of Children's Services at North Tyneside Council

In January, North Tyneside's Children's Services were graded outstanding in all areas.

I'm often asked what makes our service so successful and, for me, it comes down to our culture.

We have a culture of support where children's services does not exist on its own; it's embedded right through the organisation and with our partners.

We have a framework of what we are trying to deliver for our children, which is 'a safe, happy, healthy life and achieving in life'. But to achieve that for our children, we need to achieve that for our teams.

Our practice model places children and families at the

centre by creating something that everyone can get behind and drive with passion. The team is relentless – never stopping and always looking for that next opportunity to do something better.

Even at our Ofsted celebration, teams were saying 'what about if we did this' and 'could we try that' – and that is everything you could ask for.

The line I'm most proud of from our Ofsted report is that inspectors said our teams "positively beamed" when they spoke about "their children", demonstrating genuine affection.

The voice of children can't be tokenistic – we need to see it in everything we do – and that passion for keeping children at the centre is a strength. We can't always do what the children tell us, but we take the time to understand why they are asking for it, and provide answers and explanations.

We know that children in our care have a curiosity and drive for connection, and

understanding their identity is so important. We work hard to identify and maintain networks for this very reason.

The impact of this is demonstrated by us having one of the highest levels of kinship care in the country, and we have focused on developing our amazing 'life story' work, which gives our young people an understanding of their own stories.

What we do, we can't do alone, and we have strong relationships with health, education, policing and other organisations. We are told that we 'don't do to, we do with'; and that goes for everyone with whom we work and these partnerships are at the centre of that.

That approach exists corporately and politically, too. Our motto is that children are 20 per cent of the population and 100 per cent of the future, so a challenge in children's services is a challenge for the whole organisation

The financial pressure is high.

Market forces are driving the cost of care arrangements for children, and the North East has the highest rate of child poverty in the country and the highest numbers of children in care.

However, we have one of the lowest spends in the region, helped by things such as higher levels of in-house provision. When I started here in 2018, we had four children's homes; we now have eight, and the political and corporate commitment to have at least two more.

There is not only an understanding of the pressures, but of the difference it makes to children if you can keep them local and maintain their networks, education and their community.

What we're achieving in some areas is exceptional, but we know we have more to do, and our ambition ensures we keep moving forward.

For me, it comes down to the people and partners you have around you, and the passion, dedication and resilience of everyone involved. ●

i For more information, visit my.northtyneside.gov.uk

first

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First meeting of Folkestone & Hythe's youth forum



Councillor Anita Jones (Green)
is Chair of Folkestone & Hythe
District Council

As any councillor knows, making sure we consider the views of all our residents is essential to shaping the future of our areas.

At Folkestone & Hythe District Council, we have been looking at how to better engage young people for some time, and I was delighted to welcome 45 local students to the council chamber late last month, for the first meeting of our new youth forum.

Representatives from most secondary schools and colleges in the district, as well as a local youth group, joined us to make sure we had a good cross-section of views, and the buzz in the chamber was palpable as everyone filed in.

We worked with lots of

Young voices

young people last year as we developed our corporate plan, and used feedback from that exercise to shape an agenda that focused on the issues that came up the most – the environment and community safety.

Members of the forum came up with some fantastic ideas to use micro-grants of up to £1,000 to spearhead environmental initiatives in their communities, from tree planting and bird boxes to education and activism days. We look forward to receiving their bids for grants and seeing those ideas come to life.

It was great to welcome members of our community safety partnership – including council officers and the police – to the session, so they could hear young people's views directly and explain their roles.

The young people pointed out particular areas where

they felt unsafe, and we had an excellent discussion about what to do in different situations and where to get help. Some members of the forum will join the team on a 'walk and talk', to identify areas where we can most usefully invest funds to improve community safety.

We also gave everyone the chance to ask questions of councillors – and there was no holding back!

Members of the forum were keen to know more about: monitoring safety across the district; how we tackle violence against women and girls; what we are doing with our partners on school attendance; climate action; and how we work with the community to make sure everyone plays their part in safeguarding.

It was particularly interesting to hear how members of the forum prioritised some

of our key areas of work: safety was top for more than half of the forum, while affordable housing was also a popular choice.

Our younger residents were keenly aware that house prices in the area and our population are rising – not least because of recent positive news coverage for our main town – and were understandably concerned about what this meant for them as they approached adulthood.

This is something the council is very focused on, and it was enormously helpful to hear the young people's perspectives.

I'm looking forward to finding lots more opportunities to work with the forum and our wider youth population over the coming months, and am very grateful to the officers and councillors who made our first meeting such a success. ●

See **www.folkestone-hythe.gov.uk/** to find out more about the council's work

Innovation is the only choice



Councillor Amanda De Ryk (Lab)
is Cabinet Member for Finance,
Resources and Performance at
Lewisham Council

Tight budgets still threaten the public sector, demand still grows for our services. We are sick of saying 'we need to do more with less', but, sadly, it is still true.

As a cabinet member with the finance portfolio in a London borough with high levels of people in need, it is a daily challenge to do anything more than balance the books.

In 'The Republic', Plato said: "Our need will be the real creator." Ancient Greece may not have much in common with today's Lewisham, but austerity funding has certainly been a driver of invention.

We are trying to be smarter, to make more use of our data, collective knowledge and partnerships, to deliver better results and build resilience in our communities.

We've championed the use of cutting-edge technology. We partnered with Microsoft to host an innovative hackathon, getting the best brains in the sector to simplify council employment processes.

We have used the same approach to overhaul our registrars service, making thousands of pounds in efficiencies.

Would we have done this with higher levels of funding? The answer is probably yes, eventually, but we would have looked to procure a solution



from a provider rather than benefit from free consultancy given as part of the social value contribution of the contract.

We were delighted when Mayor Sir Sadiq Khan announced school meal funding for primary children in London, but worried that, if families didn't sign up for free school meals, our funding would drop.

So, we used our low-income family tracker and school census data to identify and write to eligible families. We spent £800 on postage and generated £1,500 in additional funding for every £1 spent.

The innovation was to auto-enrol families, allowing them to opt out, rather than hoping they would opt in. As a result, Lewisham schools now receive

an extra £1.2 million in pupil premium funding.

Austerity funding has targeted a laser beam on contract spend and we have had to be determined to extract as much value as we can from every Lewisham pound we pay out.

Our procurement policy has a non-negotiable focus on social value, embedding job creation, training, skills development and community infrastructure into every contract.

This has resulted in the largest local and regional spend in the country.

Numbers don't lie – in 2023, we were delighted that this focus secured £18 million in wages for local residents, saw 824 residents

employed through contracts, and £74 million spent in the Lewisham supply chain.

Austerity has been bad for local government. It has driven us to the wall – but with our backs up against that wall, we have had to use fresh thinking to survive.

We have had to evolve quickly just to keep our basic provision going. We are now in a position where, with proper funding, we could deliver real, positive change for our communities, and do it more efficiently and effectively than ever before.

Now give us the funds! ●

See www.lewisham.gov.uk

Electoral momentum



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

Reform UK's electoral momentum continues with another five gains (three from Labour, two from Conservative), bringing its total to 13 since the general election. In a further 12 recent by-elections, Reform candidates finished in second place.

Conservatives enjoyed success against Labour and the Greens, but internal divisions continue to undermine its recovery. Labour's seven defeats brought its total net losses to 33 seats since coming to power nationally.

Labour gained control of Medway Council in 2023, but the loss of both seats in Rochester East & Warren Wood to Reform means its majority has now gone.

Reform also won in Torfaen's Trevethin & Penygarn ward, with 47 per cent of the vote. The Conservatives chose not to contest, but Reform had to overcome two Independents and a Green.

The Conservatives faced a difficult challenge in Tendring. The Bentleys and Frating ward forms part of Nigel Farage's Clacton constituency and a

38-point swing to Reform proved more than adequate, with the Conservatives slipping to third place.

Since 2015, Conservatives were unopposed in Breckland's Bedingfield ward – then Labour beat local MP Liz Truss at the general election. In this by-election, Reform squeezed both main parties and won more than half the votes.

On paper, the Conservatives faced few problems, ousting Labour in Hyndburn's Baxenden ward and Westminster's Vincent Square. But in the former, Reform finished only 38 votes behind the winner, as Labour came in third; and the latter seat was recaptured largely because of a swing away from Labour to Reform.

The absence of an Independent candidate in the two-member ward of Bransgore, in the New Forest, contributed

to a 33-point surge in Conservative support and a comfortable victory.

Green compensation came with a gain from Labour in Warwick, where the two parties form the administration.

Pendle's Vivary Bridge ward has mostly elected Conservative councillors, but the absence of a Green candidate proved key to a narrow Liberal Democrat victory this time round.

The Conservatives were unable to defend the vacancy in the Haverfordwest Prendergast ward, with Independent Alun Wills topping the poll with less than a third of the vote.

In May 2024, Independent Theo Dennison contested Hounslow's Brentford West in a by-election, finishing second, but has now won in Syon and Brentford Lock – but only by 12 votes. ●

By-election results

Breckland, Bedingfield

REF GAIN FROM CON
26.9% over Con | Turnout 29.9%

Hounslow, Syon & Brentford Lock

IND GAIN FROM LAB
0.7% over Lab | Turnout 20.9%

Hyndburn, Baxenden

CON GAIN FROM LAB
3.3% over Ref | Turnout 36.6%

Medway, Rochester East & Warren Wood

2 REF GAIN FROM LAB
3.8% over Lab | Turnout 24.4%

New Forest, Bransgore, Burley, Sopley and Ringwood East

CON GAIN FROM GREEN
41.1% over Green | Turnout 30.0%

Pembrokeshire, Haverfordwest Prendergast

IND GAIN FROM CON
6.2% over Lib Dem | Turnout 37.1%

Pendle, Vivary Bridge

LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON
2.7% over Ref | Turnout 20.7%

Tendring, The Bentleys and Frating

REF GAIN FROM CON
10.9% over Lib Dem | Turnout 30.8%

Torfaen, Trevethin & Penygarn

REF GAIN FROM LAB
20.4% over Lab | Turnout 24.7%

Warwick, Warwick All Saints & Woodloes

GREEN GAIN FROM LAB
12.9% over Ref | Turnout 27.8%

Westminster, Vincent Square

CON GAIN FROM LAB
12.9% over Lab | Turnout 29.1%

I Only results where a ward changed hands are shown here. For more information on all recent by-elections, please visit lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections

LGA 2025

Conference and Exhibition
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