

first

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Improvement support for councils

Reforming planning

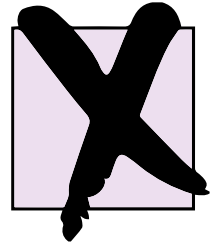
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A fairer future

Driving action on public health and prevention **p12**

Elections preview

Looking ahead to 1 May local and mayoral polls **p30**



Notice of Group Elections 2025

The Local Government Association (LGA) Independent Group will hold elections in June 2025 for the posts of:

Group Leader
(LGA Company Director)

Deputy Group Leader
(LGA Company Director)

Group Treasurer / AGM Chair

Election guidance and Nomination papers are available on the Independent Group's website. Completed nomination forms must be received by email to the Returning Officer no later than 5.00pm on Friday 23 May.

All councillors from councils in membership of the LGA and part of the LGA Independent Group (Independents / Residents Association / Green / Plaid Cymru and smaller parties) at the time of close of nominations, will be eligible to stand for election and vote.

In the event of there being more than one nomination for a position, an electronic ballot will be held.

A unique voter link will be issued to all Independent Group members on Wednesday 4 June and the ballot will close at 5.00pm on Wednesday 25 June.

Results will be announced at the Group Annual General Meeting on Tuesday 1 July.

For further information please contact: **Shelagh O'Brien**, Returning Officer for the Independent Group elections 2025
Telephone: 020 7664320, Email: independent.grouplga@local.gov.uk

first

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

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



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



Local elections

Good luck to everyone standing in next week's local elections and thanks to all our hard-working democratic services and elections officers for ensuring the smooth running of our polls.

In addition to our usual by-elections round-up (p28), we have a preview of the 1 May elections from Professors Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (p30) in this edition of **first**.

I'm delighted the LGA has launched its government-funded sector support programme for 2025/26, which is once again packed full of vital tools, support and learning to help councils respond to current developments and drive improvement and innovation (p10).

Elsewhere, our public affairs team takes a look at MPs' recommendations on safeguarding vulnerable residents during the digital switchover from traditional telephone networks (p8), and the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (p9).

We have a focus on public health, following our successful joint annual conference with the Association of Directors of Public Health last month (p12), and we're also seeking your views on next steps in respect of councils' work on climate change (p15).

It's not too late to enter your top apprentices for the Local Government Apprentice of the Year event (p18), while our lead comment this month is from the District Councils' Network (p19). ●

Councillor Louise Gittins
is LGA Chair

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Time to end 'sticking plaster' funding for councils, says LGA

Nearly 75 per cent of responding councils anticipate significant challenges in setting a balanced budget for the 2025/26 financial year, according to an LGA survey.

The survey, published ahead of the Government's Spending Review in June, highlights the growing financial pressures faced by councils, threatening their ability to deliver key local services.

The LGA has estimated that councils in England are facing a funding gap of more than £8 billion by 2028/29.

The survey also reveals that two in 10 councils lack confidence in their ability to meet statutory duties, a figure that doubles for 2026/27.

The LGA is urging the Government to use the Spending Review to provide sustainable, long-term funding for local authorities to ensure councils can continue to support vulnerable communities, improve local infrastructure, and

contribute to national economic growth.

It warned that further budget cuts to plug growing funding gaps will affect the most vulnerable members of society and the services our communities rely on every day.

For communities, this could mean more older and disabled people struggling to access vital care, less support for families in crisis, more potholes on our roads, less frequent bin collections, cuts to vital bus and home-to-school transport routes, and children left without access to vital special educational needs provision, the LGA said.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said:

"Without adequate funding for council services, the consequences for so many people who rely upon them could be devastating.

"The time for sticking plasters and emergency government bailouts needs to come to an end.

"While the economic landscape is



clearly challenging for government, the Spending Review must provide a long-term plan to adequately fund councils so they can provide the services communities rely on, and for them to play their critical role in bolstering growth and turning the Government's reform agenda into a reality." ●

'No future for NHS dentistry without reform' – MPs

NHS dentistry in England is "broken", with fewer patients seen since the introduction of a dental recovery plan last year, according to a report from the Commons' Public Accounts Committee.

The report calls for a new contract to be negotiated with dentists and for more resources to be devoted to local health boards, who commission dentistry services.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "The committee is right to highlight the challenges around access to NHS dentistry.

"No local authority area in the country has more than



one dentist per 1,000 of the population who provides NHS treatment, with rural and more deprived areas more likely to have shortages in NHS dentists than their counterparts.

"Communities face

significant challenges with regard to NHS contractual arrangements and patient charges. There's a significant call from across the political spectrum for a rapid and radical reform of NHS

dentistry, the way it's commissioned and provided.

"We will not solve problems of decayed, missing and filled teeth by only improving access to dental services.

"Improving oral health and reducing oral health inequalities requires community-based oral health promotion programmes and a more prevention-focused dental service.

"In the Spending Review, councils need a real terms increase in their public health grant so they can provide vital oral health improvement programmes to prevent longer-term health problems." ●

● See p12, public health

Call for better support for armed forces

The Armed Forces Covenant is being inconsistently applied in different areas of the country and when military personnel move into a new area, according to MPs.

The covenant is intended to ensure that former and serving members of the Armed Forces and their families are not

disadvantaged as a result of service life, but the Commons' Defence Committee found some members of the community are missing out on vital support.

It has called for the legal duty to give due regard to military service to be expanded to central government departments and the devolved administrations.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Councils are committed to supporting the Armed Forces communities through the covenant, meeting veterans' needs and ensuring they have access to housing, health and community services.

"It is positive this report recognises the role of councils and the need to co-design any changes to legislation with local authorities. It is important councils are consulted on any changes.

"However, councils need to be adequately funded in the Spending Review so they can provide the resources to help support our veterans, in particular should councils be given additional duties." ●



Digital adult care training plans announced

Government plans to move adult social care services from 'analogue to digital' will not on their own provide the changes the sector needs, the LGA has warned.

Plans include a new qualification where care leaders are trained to use the latest technology across care settings.

Training will focus on tools such as motion sensors to detect and alert staff to patient falls, video telecare, and artificial intelligence to automate routine tasks like note-taking.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Investment in using the latest technology in social care could be transformative, whether that is for system efficiency, data analytics for prevention, or customer service.

"Therefore, it is good the Government has announced staff will be trained to use this to help provide the care and support people rely on.

"But latest technology alone will not provide all the changes the sector needs, nor can it be a substitute for human contact.

"The Spending Review must provide much-needed funding to tackle immediate challenges, lay the ground for the Casey Commission's work, and support the care workforce, including for the fair pay agreement government is prioritising.

"Without immediate government action, care services will remain at risk, with devastating consequences for people and families who have cause to draw on them." ●

'1,700 children's social care referrals a day'

The LGA is leading calls for adequate long-term funding for children's social care in the Spending Review, due on 11 June.

It comes as figures show around 1,700 children are referred to children's social care services in England every day.

There were 621,880 referrals to children's social care in the year ending 31 March 2024.

Almost a quarter of a million investigations were carried out last year to determine whether a child was suffering significant harm, or at risk of it.

The LGA said the figures show why the Government should ensure all councils receive sufficient funding in the Spending Review to invest in family help, child protection, and children in care and care leaver services.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's

Children and Young People Board, said: "Council support for children and young people is central to the delivery of the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity.

"The Spending Review is an opportunity for long-term, sustainable funding for children's social care and the services children and families rely on, that puts the sector on a stable footing and provides the support that enables every child to thrive."

A spokesperson for the Children's Charities Coalition said: "With around 1,700 children being referred to social care every day, and with increasingly complex needs, it's never been more important that services can match this growing demand and reach families early on before they hit crisis point." ●

News in brief

At risk children

A report by Channel 4 News has highlighted how government needs to ensure that local services have the capacity and resources to keep children safe. It comes as 78 out of 153 local authorities who replied to a Freedom of Information request revealed that 3,680 children are currently at risk of child sexual exploitation. Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "Many of the barriers to protecting children, and the issues leading to additional risk, are societal challenges that central government must work in partnership with local partners to overcome. This includes tackling poverty, improving access to good quality housing and improving mental health." ● See p16

Get Britain working

The LGA has called for the Jobcentre Plus (JCP) network to be accountable to the local areas it serves, as well as to national government. In recently published evidence to MPs, the LGA also welcomed plans set out in the Get Britain Working White Paper to integrate JCP with the national careers service. One of the five principles underpinning the reform is for it to be more locally responsive, embedded and engaged – a long-standing ask of the LGA and local government. "We look forward to local government – both councils and statutory authorities – having a seat at the table as the National Job Centre Service is designed," the LGA's evidence concludes.

£500m for potholes

The Government has announced an extra £500 million for councils' road maintenance budgets and requirements to prove progress to release some of this funding. Cllr Adam Hug, the LGA's Transport Spokesperson, said the additional funding would help to start addressing the £17 billion "ever-growing backlog of local road repairs" – but noted that councils already spend more than they receive from central government on tackling potholes and repairing roads. Councils need sufficient long-term funding certainty to focus on more cost-effective preventative roadworks, he added.

Reforms and more funding for audit

The Government will provide funding to councils to cover the costs of additional audit fees, with a first tranche of £49 million for qualifying local authorities in 2025/26.

The funding is to help build back reassurance for local authorities affected by the audit backstop process, designed to clear the current backlog in council audits.

Cllr Pete Marland, Chair of the LGA's Economy and Resources Board, said government had responded positively to the LGA's concerns on councils' audit costs, but said it was crucial the amount of funding available is kept under review against actual costs, to "ensure it meets the long-term needs of making the audit system sustainable".

The Government has also published the outcome of a consultation on local audit reform and set out more details

of how the new regulatory body – the Local Audit Office (LAO) – will operate as part of efforts to address the "broken" local audit system.

It said the LAO will "hold responsibility for quality oversight of local audit", which will include overseeing an inspection programme, enforcement, and appropriate elements of supervision.

Cllr Marland added: "The LGA strongly believed each council should retain the right to appoint its own audit committee chair and it is good we have been successful in making this case. However, the new mandatory requirement for every audit committee to include at least one independent member will mean the Government will need to ensure guidance addresses specific concerns that we raised in our consultation response." ●

New empty homes toolkit for officers

The LGA has released a new Empty Homes Officer Toolkit to help councils take practical, effective steps to tackle long-term empty homes in their area.

Created in partnership with the Empty Homes Network, the toolkit responds to calls from the sector for a more accessible, on-the-ground resource.

It offers detailed guidance on how councils can identify empty properties, set up and manage an empty homes database, and progress cases efficiently.

The toolkit includes: a step-by-step guide through the stages of empty homes work; tools for data cleansing and case prioritisation; advice on applying empty homes premiums; and draft letters and a bank of information to support investigations.

Designed to streamline processes and strengthen local action, the toolkit aims to empower officers with the practical resources needed to return properties to use.



Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "This toolkit will give empty homes officers the practical tools they need to bring more properties back into use and support councils in tackling the issue more effectively."

The toolkit is available at www.local.gov.uk/publications ●

£2bn confirmed for affordable housing

A £2 billion investment into the Affordable Homes Programme (AHP) will help deliver up to 18,000 new social and affordable homes in England, according to ministers.

The Government said the funding, confirmed in March's Spring Statement, would support the "biggest boost in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation".

The announcement ensures that housing providers can continue to deliver homes without disruption while

the next phase of the AHP is developed.

Cllr Adam Hug, the LGA's Housing Spokesperson, said: "This additional funding for affordable housing will provide much needed certainty and stability to councils and other housing providers.

"It will ensure momentum can be maintained in the delivery of social and affordable homes, ahead of an announcement about the successor to the AHP.

"Alongside this, the Government must also deliver a long-term sustainable funding framework for social housing so that councils can invest in their existing stock, as well as ramping up vital new-build programmes." ●

Record number of children in temporary accommodation

More than 164,000 children in England are currently living in temporary accommodation – the highest figure on record.

In a new report, the Commons' Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee describes the situation as a crisis, with children living in "appalling conditions" to the detriment of their health and education.

Its report highlights the increasing strain on local authorities and the urgent need for reform.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "Every child and family deserve quality, stable accommodation, and councils strive to make sure that the necessary support is available.

"But the scale of the challenge facing local government on temporary accommodation and homelessness – and the financial pressures – are immense.

"Frozen temporary accommodation subsidy rates have left councils to pick up more than £700 million in temporary accommodation costs that they are unable to claim back from government.

"Government needs to use the upcoming



Spending Review to ensure that councils are sufficiently resourced, including by urgently increasing the temporary accommodation subsidy."

With councils facing increasing demand, while struggling with rising costs and limited housing stock, the LGA is also calling for the removal of ringfencing within the Homelessness Prevention Grant, the uprating of local housing allowance rates, and the introduction of a flexible, multi-year prevention funding model.

Under new rules, only 51 per cent of the £633 million Homelessness Prevention Grant can be used for temporary accommodation – leaving councils with a gap of £76 million in funds they need to find compared with last year. ●



Cladding remediation 'too slow' – MPs

Eight years on from the Grenfell fire that claimed 72 lives, it is still not known how many buildings have unsafe cladding and when it will be removed, according to MPs.

A report from the Public Accounts Committee also warns that the Government's Remediation Acceleration Plan, published late last year, is at risk of not delivering.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "Councils are committed to keeping tenants and residents safe, and are keen to work with government to drive the pace of remediation.

"However, as this report shows, it is still a major issue that requires significant funding and resource to address properly.

"The severe financial pressures facing councils is having an impact on their ability to carry out this work as swiftly as they, and their communities, would like."

Councils and fire services are already taking enforcement action against building owners failing to meet safety obligations.

The LGA said it looked forward to seeing: the funding to double enforcement promised in the Remediation Acceleration Plan; improved access to remediation funding for social housing; and new powers for councils in the forthcoming Remediation Bill – which it called on government to bring forward as soon as possible. ●

Care to connect

Safeguarding vulnerable residents in the digital switchover

The shift from traditional ‘analogue’ telephone networks to digital affects businesses, public services and national infrastructure – but it is vulnerable and older individuals who face the greatest risk.

Telecare devices such as pendant alarms and fall detectors are still connected to analogue lines, meaning users could be left without life-saving support if migration is not properly managed.

Local authorities are on the frontline of this transition, ensuring residents and care providers are informed and supported. However, councils are facing major funding and resource constraints.

This is why a new report, from the Digital Communities All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), has called on the Government to deliver ringfenced funding that enables combined authorities and future strategic authorities to improve the capacity and capability of dedicated digital teams to coordinate and deliver digital transformation and adoption.

Helen Morgan MP, Chair of the APPG, stressed the importance of government action: “The switch to digital is necessary, but no-one should be left without a lifeline. We need a coordinated effort to protect those most at risk.”

The APPG – for which the LGA acts as secretariat – has particularly drawn attention to proposals for a national telecare awareness campaign that is funded by BT and Virgin Media O2.

The campaign aims to raise awareness of the digital switchover and further identify vulnerable residents beyond data-sharing agreements.

Reflecting on the complexity of the



digital switchover, the needs of residents and businesses, and the differing approaches and timelines of providers of communication services, the APPG’s report argues that buy-in and support from the voluntary and community sector and local government is critical to the campaign’s success.

The ‘Public Switched Telephone Network’ (PSTN) migration will see communications providers move customers from the existing analogue landline network to new, upgraded fibre services, of which more than half of lines have already been migrated.

There is unanimous agreement that the analogue network is rapidly deteriorating and that the new network will provide a future-proof and more reliable service.

The digital switchover is industry led, although not all service providers need to migrate customers because they do not have responsibility for any PSTN lines.

While timelines vary between them, communications providers are broadly working to migrate all customers by 2027.

The APPG’s report, ‘Care to Connect: PSTN Migration’, argues that the role of government needs to be clearly defined in digital transformation projects.

However, it acknowledges that ministers

in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology have become gradually more involved in the PSTN switchover with interventions to monitor management of the switchover and to put additional safeguards in place for residents

The report sets out several other recommendations to mitigate risks and ensure a smooth transition, including on:

- data-sharing agreements between communication providers and local authorities and housing associations
- the proposed national telecare campaign
- power back-up solutions in response to outages
- the ‘sunsetting’ of 2G and 3G networks
- telecare sector standards.

The APPG has committed to working with government, industry, and local authorities to ensure no-one is left behind in this transition.

With time running out before the full switch-off, urgent coordination is needed to safeguard those most at risk. ●

i You can read the full report and further recommendations online at <https://digitalcommunities.inparliament.uk>

As first was going to press, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill was in its committee stage in the House of Commons, following its second reading in March.

The bill includes wide-ranging proposals to reform the planning system in England, with the aim of increasing the supply of housing and delivering infrastructure more efficiently.

The LGA briefed MPs ahead of the second reading debate, highlighting our support for the ambition to deliver more homes and infrastructure, and welcoming certain measures – including several long-standing LGA asks, such as making it easier for councils to purchase vacant land for housebuilding, localising planning fees, and increasing planning capacity.

These measures have the potential to support councils in delivering the homes and infrastructure communities need.

However, the LGA raised some concerns, in particular, calling for further clarity on how national policies and the proposed ‘statutory spatial development strategies’ will interact with councils’ local plans.

The bill also introduces

Reforming the planning system

Councillors play a vital role in reflecting local needs

a new national scheme of delegation, which will set rules for whether planning applications are decided by officers or committees.

While the details of the scheme are still subject to consultation, we are clear that councils must remain at the heart of the planning process, and that communities should continue to have a meaningful voice on decisions that affect them.

Councillors play a vital role in representing local views and making planning decisions that reflect the needs of their areas.

These points were raised throughout the debate, with members from across the House citing the LGA’s positions.

Kevin Hollinrake, Shadow

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary, expressed concerns from the opposition, particularly regarding the removal of councillors’ ability to vote on planning applications, and the effect on local democratic accountability.

Mr Hollinrake stated that “the LGA itself strongly opposes these changes”, criticising specifically the reduction in councillors’ powers.

Gideon Amos MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Housing and Planning, emphasised the crucial role of local councillors in shaping communities, quoting the LGA’s briefing that “the role councillors play in the planning system is the backbone of

that system. That is the way it should remain”.

Mr Amos warned that removing planning decisions from councillors effectively removes them from local communities. He also stressed the importance of council housing and addressing blockages within the housing sector.

Nesil Caliskan MP (Lab), an LGA Vice-President, supported the bill, emphasising the urgent housing crisis evident in her constituency.

Ms Caliskan highlighted serious capacity and resourcing issues in local authority planning teams, underscoring the pressures local authorities will be under to deliver the Government’s housing targets.

The bill passed its second reading by 330 votes to 74 and is now in committee.

The LGA will continue to brief parliamentarians at every stage of the bill’s passage and will respond to the forthcoming consultation on planning committees and the national scheme of delegation.

We will work closely with government to ensure that reforms to the planning system are effective, deliverable, and locally led. ●



i The LGA’s full briefing on the second reading of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is at www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses. See p21, p26

Sector-led improvement

The LGA has launched its 2025/26 support programme



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

With so much happening across local government, access to support has never been so important.

The LGA's wide-ranging sector support programme, which is funded by the UK Government, has been updated for 2025/26 to reflect the current challenges and opportunities for local authorities across the country.

Our offer is again packed full of vital tools, support and learning, to help councils respond to current developments and to drive improvement and innovation while, critically, providing those services on which our communities rely.

Everything we do is informed by a sector-led improvement approach, which draws on direct insights from councils – ensuring all of our support continues to be guided by the sector's current needs.

This includes a significant package of support following the English Devolution White Paper, to be led by the LGA's regional teams. The tools and resources available are set out on the LGA's devolution and local government reorganisation hub (see www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub). It includes access to networks, service-specific

support (for example, on children's and adults' services), and webinars covering key topics, including opportunities to learn from local and combined authority representatives with experience of local government reorganisation (LGR) and devolution.

Our corporate peer challenges (CPCs) remain an important and valued improvement and assurance tool, with 100 per cent of councils consistently saying that the process of preparing for and participating in a CPC has had a positive impact on them.

Our recently strengthened CPC programme provides robust and credible challenge, with a stronger focus on performance, governance and culture to reflect the current challenges to the sector and its Best Value duties. For 2025/26, this offer has been refreshed to ensure that CPCs and progress reviews can be tailored as appropriate to support local and combined authorities navigating next steps and priorities in relation to LGR and devolution.

Our leadership programmes will continue to play a vital role in ensuring councils have the skills and knowledge to deliver and lead, including through times of change.

With more than 2,000 councillor placements delivered in 2024/25, schemes such as Leadership Academy, Leadership Essentials and Next Generation remain cornerstones of this offer, alongside our development offers for chief executives and other statutory officers, delivered with partners including Solace, the members' network for local government professionals, the Chartered Institute of

Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), and Lawyers in Local Government.

Also co-developed with Solace, the LGA's award-winning national recruitment campaign will continue to be rolled out across the country, highlighting the benefits of a career in local



“Our leadership programmes will continue to play a vital role in ensuring councils have the skills and knowledge to deliver and lead”

“With local elections approaching, it’s timely to highlight our ‘changes in political leadership or control’ offer... which can help smooth transitions”

Meanwhile, other programmes – including Children’s Services Improvement, Partners in Care and Health, and the Planning Advisory Service – provide further tools and support to respond in service-specific areas.

In 2025/26, our workforce programme will also provide support to address complex challenges such as incoming ‘Make work pay’ reforms and equal pay issues. In addition, it will continue the important work of managing national collective bargaining arrangements for 1.4 million employees.

With local elections approaching, it is also timely to highlight our ‘changes in political leadership or control’ offer, which can be drawn on before and after elections to help smooth transitions around political changes.

This forms part of our wider regional support programme – underpinned by experienced member and officer peers (see p17) – including mentoring, top-team development, and a range of bespoke support and advice.

Direct and focused support is also available for any councils facing enhanced challenges, and is offered alongside a wider range of preventative options, providing tools and help to stop challenges from worsening.

Finance support is a key part of our offer to the sector. New in this year’s programme, and responding to demand from local government, is increased emphasis on audit and support, focusing on ‘exceptional financial support’ (EFS).

This includes helping new members to understand the implications of EFS, an event on EFS for audit forums, an ‘audit mapping’ pilot, and a new masterclass on the recruitment, induction and use of independent members on audit

committees, informed by the development of new guidance.

Financial improvement sustainability advisers – all of whom are current or former chief finance officers – remain a key part of this offer, providing advice and support across a range of budgetary issues.

Underlining the important role of data in decision-making, I would also encourage councils to make use of LG Inform (see www.local.gov.uk/lginform), the LGA’s freely available, award-winning data-benchmarking tool.

With a number of new reports being added this year, this powerful platform uniquely integrates thousands of local-level data metrics to enable councils, the public sector and communities to compare local authority performance, including those with similar characteristics, such as CIPFA’s ‘nearest neighbours’.

In addition to the above, the LGA delivers support across further key areas. Programmes covering sustainability, procurement, culture, tourism and sport, building safety (our Joint Inspection Team), One Public Estate, and cyber, digital and technology are all part of our offer – as are tools and resources to help councils explore the possibilities of artificial intelligence.

Support across all of the areas mentioned continues to deliver positive outcomes for the sector. Year on year, we see 100 per cent of councils engaging with our improvement programmes and, according to our latest survey, 100 per cent of chief executives and 97 per cent of leaders report that the LGA’s improvement support has had a positive impact on their authorities. ●

I See www.local.gov.uk/SSO2526 to find out more about how the new LGA offer might support your council. For further information about any aspect of the offer, please contact the LGA principal adviser for your region (see www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers)



government and helping to attract new talent to the sector. Along with our graduate development programmes and workforce offers, such as a new Retention and Reset scheme, this support recognises the incredible capacity and demand pressures that all councils are facing.

A strategy for a fairer future

Driving progress on public health

The LGA has reiterated its clear call for a national health inequalities strategy rooted in prevention and joint local-national leadership.

LGA Chair Cllr Louise Gittins, speaking at the joint LGA and Association of Directors of Public Health's (ADPH's) annual public health conference earlier this month, said: "We must create a society where all residents, regardless of their background or postcode, can thrive and live healthy lives."

The conference, billed as 'A call to action for a fairer future', brought together nearly 1,300 delegates in its largest virtual gathering to date.

Panellists and participants came together to share insights on public health

practice, exploring how to tackle the inequalities facing our communities.

For the first time, the conference hosted a virtual Innovation Zone, sponsored by the National Institute for Health and Care Research.

Keynote speaker Professor Sir Michael Marmot reminded delegates why this work matters, stating that addressing inequalities is not just a moral imperative, but also essential for "the economy, sustainability and the future of society".

He praised the "real political will to make a difference" shown by local leaders across the country.

Across three days, the conference spanned a wide range of vital topics, from tackling teenage pregnancy and



"Public health can often be a tough sell... we need to show how it makes immediate impacts"

Food, diet and obesity

Obesity continues to be a key public health challenge for councils and wider public finances.

It is estimated that the NHS spends £6.5 billion on obesity-related health care each year, while the cost to wider society is estimated to be £27 billion a year.

Councils have spent more than £1 billion tackling child and adult obesity since responsibility for public health transferred to them in 2013, against a backdrop of public health grant reductions (up until the current 2025/26 financial year, which has seen a 3 per cent real-terms grant increase).

The LGA, as part of its ongoing influencing and lobbying work, briefed Peers ahead of a Lords' debate last month on food, diet and obesity, highlighting government policies that have had an impact and promoting additional measures that would support councils' work on tackling these issues.

For example, the briefing highlighted the success of the soft-drinks industry levy, introduced in 2018, which may have reduced the number of under-18s having a tooth removed because of tooth decay by 12 per cent and saved more than 5,500 hospital admissions.

However, it said it was disappointing that the proceeds from the levy – which were earmarked as new money to invest in children's sports and healthy eating programmes – have since been diverted to address gaps in existing departmental funding.

The briefing highlighted other policy tools for preventing obesity that would support the work of councils, including: updating the Licensing Act to include a public health objective and allow councils to take action where premises fail to protect the health of their communities; and expanding the Healthy Start scheme to

include all those on Universal Credit with young children aged up to five years old.

Councils also need new powers and funding to support more children and families to live healthier lives, including: tackling the clustering of existing takeaways and restricting junk food advertising near schools; and having more say on how the sugar-industry levy is spent.

i To read the LGA's parliamentary briefing on food, diet and obesity in full, please visit www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses



understanding urban health, to devolution and addressing alcohol harm.

A standout moment was hearing from two brilliant young people, Arshan and Jordan, both Young Trainers with the charity Association for Young People's Health. They shared powerful personal stories about health inequalities, underscoring the need for policies shaped with young people, not just for them.

The closing plenary, 'Shaping the future of public health', chaired by Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, brought together a dynamic panel: Greg Fell, President of the ADPH; William Roberts, Chief Executive of the Royal Society for Public Health; Professor Tracy Daszkiewicz, Vice-President of the Faculty of Public Health; and Siva Anandaciva, Director of Policy at The King's Fund.

Their discussion captured how to

"Lead members are well placed to be local health champions... supporting communities to take an active role in prevention"

future-proof public health and deliver real impact amid system and global challenges. When asked about measuring return on investment, Mr Fell pointed out the challenge of visibility: "Public health can often be a tough sell. People have short attention spans and aren't interested in something that might happen in 20 years.

"We need to show how public health makes immediate impacts."

The panel called for a broader approach to evidence, moving beyond easily quantifiable metrics to long-term, transformative outcomes.

The future workforce was another key theme.

Professor Daszkiewicz stressed the importance of nurturing public health professionals who understand their purpose and are equipped to work across sectors: "We need to create an environment that allows people to realise their passion."

There was also a refreshing focus on public health success stories.

Mr Roberts celebrated the 'greatest hits' of public health – from reductions in teenage pregnancy to water fluoridation and cleaner air. He encouraged leaders to build on proven approaches, rather than reinventing the wheel.

The message was clear: public

Ill-health prevention

Lead members have a vital role to play in driving whole-system change – ensuring ill-health prevention is embedded in all council functions, and promoting collaboration with partners in the NHS, the wider public sector, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, and the business sector.

They are well placed to be local health champions, engaging with communities to hear their priorities, and supporting them to take an active role in prevention.

Given severely constrained resources and growing need, approaches to prevention should, as far as possible, be based on evidence, consider return on investment and be ambitious – embracing transformation rather than sticking with 'business as usual'.

Adopting a 'health in all policies' approach provides a useful framework to support whole-system working across all sectors and with all partners.

The LGA's 'Making the case for prevention: a must know for councillors', sets out why prevention is important, examines the determinants of health and health inequalities (many of which, such as housing, fall under the remit of councils), gives examples of preventative measures and barriers to prevention, and sets out how to make the case for investment and a strategic shift to prevention.

i See moredetails.uk/42JnCIS to find out more

health needs to be central to decision-making. The onus is now on us to translate these insights into consistent, collaborative efforts, and to champion bold leadership that drives genuine progress for our communities. ●

i To find out more about the LGA's work on public health, please visit moredetails.uk/3RN3SVo

LGASOLUTIONS **hub**

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LGA Solutions is of the sector and for the sector, and we are passionate about working collaboratively with councils to help you achieve your ambitions.

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- Data and benchmarking
- Corporate



local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-solutions

Acting on climate change

The LGA is consulting on a new duty for councils



Councillor Adam Hug is Chair of the LGA's Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board

Tackling climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing our communities and ranks high in people's priorities.

In 2022, public opinion specialist Ipsos found that eight in 10 people are concerned by it, three-quarters want to deliver net zero by 2050, and half want to bring that target forward.

Councils in England and Wales recognise the urgency and scale of this challenge, with more than 300 declaring climate emergencies.

Local government has some impact over 80 per cent of local emissions and direct impact over a third, given its central role in housing, transport and energy. While national action is essential in setting the framework and taking the big decisions, the complexity of transition in our many cities, towns and villages cannot

be managed from a desk in Whitehall.

The LGA set out its vision for supporting government to achieve net zero in our Local Government White Paper (see www.local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper).

Since its publication, we have been working with government on its green energy mission, to ensure local government is equipped to play its full role in accelerating to net zero, tackling the ecological crisis and taking action on adaptation.

Any coherent and deliverable plan to act on climate change relies on local delivery. This means sharing responsibility and empowering place-based leadership.

Councils can target and join up delivery to ensure it is efficient and effective in key sectors, including housing, retrofit, energy systems, transport, nature, waste, and more. However, local government action is often hampered by a lack of clarity, certainty, resources, powers and responsibilities.

Councils in England receive no core funding for climate and nature action, and are instead forced to compete for



short-term pots of funding, consuming resources and creating uncertainty. Set against the backdrop of wider local government service and finance pressures, leadership on climate action is squeezed out.

With the range of reforms under way across the green energy mission, devolution and local government reorganisation, there is an opportunity to rewire the relationship, and put in place a statutory framework to give all local authorities the certainty, clarity, flexibility, powers, resources, technical support, and shared endeavour to accelerate towards net zero.

A wide range of expert interventions have drawn a similar conclusion, including from the National Audit Office, the Climate Change Committee, and the Skidmore Review, as well as from across local government.

A rewired relationship requires rewired accountability,

and there is space now for a fuller discussion on the options, opportunities and barriers, what new legal requirements could look like, and what is needed for them to make the difference. Consequently, the LGA has opened a consultation on whether councils in England should advocate for a statutory duty around climate change: their Welsh counterparts already have a legal duty to act on climate change and biodiversity.

The consultation's questions cover the policy, funding and delivery landscape, including the advantages and risks of a duty, as well as accountability mechanisms and local partnerships.

We want to hear from councils, local government representative networks, our public service partners, businesses, civil society, non-governmental organisations, parliamentarians, and other networks – so please, make your voice heard. ●

i The LGA's consultation on a new statutory duty for councils on climate change closes on 30 May. See <https://bit.ly/4IwuLdM> to access the consultation and for information about forthcoming engagement events, or email climateaction@local.gov.uk



Safeguarding children

All councillors have a role to play

The LGA has published a new 'must know' guide offering a high-level overview of the key issues relating to child safeguarding for all councillors.

This is to help councillors understand their role in ensuring their council meets its duties to protect children.

Every council, regardless of type, has legal responsibilities to safeguard children. Councillors will want to consider how their council is meeting these requirements and how all services consider child safeguarding in their plans.

This should be a factor in every council service and decision – not just those traditionally associated with children, such as education or children's social care, but also housing, licensing and adult social care.

It must consider children's safety and wellbeing wherever they are – in the home, outside of it, and online.

The guide encourages all councillors, especially those with specific duties towards children, to support the lead member for children's services and the relevant scrutiny committee, while also ensuring they know how to report any safeguarding concerns raised by constituents. But what is child safeguarding exactly?

Child safeguarding is defined as providing help and support to meet the needs of children as soon as problems

emerge, as well as protecting them from maltreatment and preventing impairment of children's mental and physical health or development.

Legislation places duties on upper-tier councils to promote the welfare of children in need and on district councils to work together to improve children's wellbeing. Every upper-tier council must designate a director and lead member for children's services, who are politically and professionally accountable for safeguarding children.

All councillors also have corporate parenting responsibilities for children in care and care leavers under the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Effective child safeguarding relies heavily on multi-agency working.

The local authority, police, and integrated care board are statutory safeguarding partners who must collaborate under local arrangements, with each partner appointing a lead and delegated safeguarding partner.

Other 'relevant agencies' – including schools, health services, housing, probation, and voluntary organisations – also have duties.

Information sharing is vital in safeguarding, and national guidance is clear that fear of sharing information must never outweigh the need to protect a child. Clear processes must be in place

to facilitate appropriate data exchange between agencies.

A child-centred approach underpins all safeguarding work. This includes prioritising children's welfare, listening to their voices, and supporting families where possible. Special attention must be given to vulnerable groups, such as disabled children, those in temporary accommodation, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Councillors are encouraged to be proactive, seek training (such as through the LGA's e-learning platform, www.local.gov.uk/councillor-e-learning) and familiarise themselves with local protocols. As a councillor, you should be familiar with your local protocols and know when and how to make a referral if you are concerned about a child (including unborn babies). You should also consider key questions about the effectiveness of services, governance, funding and partnerships.

The LGA's guide also outlines signs of potential abuse, neglect or exploitation, reminding councillors that they play a key role in identifying risks and reporting concerns. ●

i The LGA's 'Must know: safeguarding children' guide can be read in full at www.local.gov.uk/publications

Critical friends

Supporting councils' assurance and improvement



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

The City of Manchester played host to almost 170 of the LGA's member peers and staff last month, for our ninth annual member peer conference.

This year, the theme was 'Supporting councils in an ever-changing local government context', highlighting the critical work of member peers, especially given the increased focus on devolution, local government reorganisation, councils facing challenges, and rising demand.

This work includes helping to deliver the LGA's corporate peer challenge programme, peer mentoring support, top-team development, and a wide range of other peer support work.

In my role as Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, I opened

the first day of conference – alongside Cllr Garry Bridges, Deputy Leader of Manchester City Council and fellow member peer – with a warm welcome to attendees.

I was also hoping to be joined by LGA Chair Cllr Louise Gittins, who had recorded a short video message for us, only for the tech to let us down. But in the spirit of the event, we kept calm and carried on!

Jim McMahon OBE, Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, delivered the keynote address, sharing the Government's approach on the challenges and opportunities faced by the sector, including devolution and reorganisation.

Speaking as a former LGA member peer himself, he also talked about the importance of sector-led improvement and, in particular, the unique role of LGA member peers in supporting assurance and improvement across the sector.

A lively Q&A session followed, with the minister being joined by a panel comprising myself, Cllr Bridges and Dennis Skinner,

“Member peers were keen to take the opportunity to ask the minister... about future plans for local government”



Former member peer, now government minister, Jim McMahon

© LGA/Chris Sharp

LGA Director of Partnerships and Improvement.

Member peers were keen to take the opportunity to ask the minister and our panel a range of questions about future plans for local government, sector support and the LGA's role.

All member peers then moved onto their political group sessions, before a fantastic and engaging open-space session, delivered by long-standing LGA peer Peter Fleming OBE.

The last day of conference had a thought-provoking plenary session led by Cllr Eamonn O'Brien and Lynne Ridsdale, respectively Leader and Chief Executive of Bury Metropolitan Borough Council.

They spoke engagingly about their council's improvement journey and how they had harnessed the song, 'Let's Do It', by local legend Victoria Wood, to drive their improvement.

The session also covered their experience of working within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and how this has helped with their ambitions for Bury.

Member peers then moved on to a number of training

workshops covering a diverse range of subjects, including: strengthened corporate peer challenge; learning from national peers; striving for financial resilience; artificial intelligence; having difficult conversations; and regional peers and the role of the LGA's regional support teams. There were also workshops on social care, planning and transformation.

Our pilot peer ambassador communications toolkit was also launched at this year's conference. The toolkit has been developed for peers to use to champion sector-led improvement (see www.local.gov.uk/peer-ambassador-communications-toolkit).

It contains key messages, example content, and ways for peers to support the delivery of peer challenges through advocacy and demonstrate impact by leveraging their networks. ●

i The next LGA member peer conference is scheduled for 4-5 November 2025. Details will be available soon at www.local.gov.uk

Empowering growth

Could your amazing apprentice be crowned champion?

The Local Government Apprentice of the Year 2025 is a national event organised by the LGA, South West Councils, and Local Government East (formerly the East of England LGA).

Participants compete in an all-day online challenge to be crowned the sector's top apprentice.

Each year, councils in

England, Wales and Northern Ireland are invited to nominate one or more level 2 and 3 apprentices, and, in 2024, 119 took part.

They worked through a range of activities on the theme of health and wellbeing, aimed at developing successful workplace behaviours and linked to a range of apprenticeship standards. The

event's development leads were on hand to mentor and support the apprentices and assess their work through group activities.

The theme for 2025 will be unveiled nearer the time.

Each participant will receive an individual report with their scores for each activity and an 'employer checklist' with suggested questions for line managers to use, to continue the staff development conversations well beyond the close of the event itself.

Local Government Apprentice of the Year 2025 takes place from 20-21 May, and is open to all level 2 and 3 apprentices in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This includes current apprentices and those qualified within the past 12 months.

There is a charge of £149 for each participating apprentice. See www.local.gov.uk/AOTY to find out more and book your place, by 29 April. ●

Apprenticeship support

The LGA supports councils to deliver successful apprenticeship schemes that help young people into training and employment, as part of its government-funded sector support offer.

Its Apprenticeship Support programme helps councils share good practice, provides advice and guidance, and supports councils to problem solve via an action learning programme. It also audits council apprenticeship programmes through 'Apprenticeships MOT' health checks.

To find out more, please visit moredetails.uk/4iTy9h4

And the winner was...

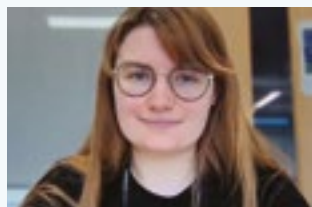
The Local Government Apprentice of the Year 2024 was Sara Jenner-Akehurst, who, at the time, was a Level 3 Business Support Apprentice from Cambridgeshire County Council.

Sara applied for the event in the hope of being able to network with other apprentices, while also pushing herself out of her comfort zone.

With assistance from the organisers, she was able to get the support she required to make the event accessible for her disabilities, and was then able to focus on her pre-event preparation – researching the theme (health and wellbeing).

Sara said: "Since winning the Local Government Apprentice of the Year, my confidence has grown.

"Attending the event showed me that I can do things, even if I feel nervous or scared. I've felt more



able to suggest changes to tasks or procedures when I think they can be improved. I'm really enjoying my new role and am excited to continue learning and doing my best!"

Since winning, Sara has completed her apprenticeship and secured a permanent role with Cambridgeshire County Council.

Her line manager, Senior Business Officer Louisa Altounis Gilby, said: "Since joining the team in October, Sara has hit the ground running in her role and has already been involved in key changes to make the service more efficient.

"We are really pleased to have Sara in the team, and are lucky to have her."





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

Last month's District Councils' Network Annual Conference took place, of course, at a time of local government reorganisation, which is set to lead to the abolition of every district council.

So, was our conference a whinge-fest or a self-pity symposium?

Neither. On the contrary, DCN's two days in Windsor were energetic, uplifting, forward-looking and bold.

This is a time of uncertainty and difficulty for all of us in local government.

While the English Devolution White Paper may be challenging, it does provide an opportunity to shake things up.

This is a chance to reconsider how best to support our communities and bring about growth, jobs, housing and to switch from responding to hardship to preventing it.

The mood among our 350-plus delegates was not to wallow in the mire. It was about making the best of the situation and using local government reorganisation (LGR) to transform local public services.

With this in mind, DCN commissioned Inner Circle Consulting to help us devise a vision for how LGR can be transformative.

Our 'Growth, reform and trust' report warns that too many regard LGR as a "short-term cost-saving exercise", which is an insufficient response to stagnant growth, fiscal restraint, rising inequality, intergenerational poverty and loss of trust in institutions.

"At worst it will be a hugely costly and disruptive process that will simply create larger versions of semi-functional or dysfunctional arrangements that aren't

"Mega councils – particularly those covering whole counties – are too large to be responsive to the unique needs of local communities"



Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen at DCN's annual conference

An opportunity to shake things up

delivering for those that need it the most or for the nation as a whole," the report says.

We're anxious to use LGR to prioritise long-term, sustainable transformation over short-term fixes, moving away from "developing services that tackle only the manifestation of need, to build those that can alleviate the risk factors triggering it".

The report says this can only be achieved through "thoughtful place-making and an intentionally place-based approach".

The place-making aspect is key.

I remain firm in my belief that mega councils – particularly those covering whole counties – are too large to be responsive to the unique needs of local communities and to transform the ethos of services.

So, it was good to hear Jim McMahon, the Local Government Minister, indicate a change of approach at our annual conference.

The 500,000 average – as opposed to minimum – populations for new unitaries he predicted is, I believe, still too large, but it is a clear move in the right direction.

District councils want to work with

our county and unitary council partners, other public bodies, local business and, in particular, our residents to rethink local government.

We don't want to recreate the old, but instead build something new that maximises both our responsiveness to local challenges and our contribution to national challenges.

The fact that all areas submitted interim LGR proposals to the Government by its 21 March deadline demonstrates a willingness to be bold.

We want to collaborate. We must continue to show that we're not working in the interests of districts or counties, but in those of our communities – our residents, who need to be at the heart of this.

We all want to make our little part of the world a better place. ●

i The DCN's report, 'Growth, reform and trust: creating places that deliver the promise and potential of local government reform' can be read at www.districtcouncils.info

GROUP LEADERS



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

The best start in life

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson's welcome announcement of the first 300 new school-based nurseries responds to a manifesto commitment and a pressing need – ensuring children get the best start in life. This deeply resonates with local leaders.

We continue to see persistent and substantial disparities in school readiness, with many children facing multiple disadvantages arising from various interlinked factors, including where they live.

This gap has long-term implications, both for our children and the places where they grow up. The fact that 80 per cent of children in Richmond upon Thames are

considered 'school ready' versus 64 per cent in Middlesbrough (and only 54 per cent of boys) is intimately connected with differing economic prospects and levels of deprivation.

Tackling such stark inequalities will clearly take considerable investment, guided by place-led interventions to increase the support and opportunities available to children.

We have led the way on this agenda, with Labour councils spending 54 per cent more per head than Conservative councils on Sure Start children's centres, and 19 per cent more on youth services.

Local government is innovating and stepping in where we see children being let down – for example, with my council's supplementary speech and language therapy to get children school ready, Torfaen's MASSH Hub, which has reduced the local population of looked-after children by 30 per cent, and South Tyneside's Mockingbird model, which creates 'constellations' of foster homes supported by a hub.

"Local government is innovating and stepping in where we see children being let down"

Equally importantly, we have a duty to enrich the lives of our young people.

Telford & Wrekin's '10 by 10' or Islington's '11 by 11' programmes are examples of such life-enhancing programmes, and the musical opportunities offered by Milton Keynes' MK Music Faculty are recognition of the value often-overlooked cultural education provides.

Early evidence shows that the new government wants to harness this dynamism and is 'walking the walk' with serious investment. It's up to us to continue making the case with progressive action.

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

Challenges and opportunities



Councillor Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA

With less than a week to go until the 1 May local elections in England, I wanted to put on record my thanks to all those colleagues who are standing for re-election or standing down.

Being a councillor – and thereby being able to make a difference to the lives of our local residents and the places we live – is hugely rewarding.

It is also an increasingly demanding role, given the wider social and political context in which we operate – so I wish you all well on 1 May and thank you for your dedication and public service.

Devolution and local government

reorganisation (LGR) continue to offer challenges and opportunities across our sector. I was pleased to see the LGA's LGR Delivery Network meet for the first time earlier this month, bringing together more than 100 officer colleagues from councils across the country to discuss the practical and technical aspects of LGR.

The LGA continues to update its devolution and LGR hub (see www.local.gov.uk/devolution-hub), and it's not too late to sign up for our latest virtual event, on 28 April, providing insights from senior elected members with recent experience of reorganisation (see www.local.gov.uk/events)

Meanwhile, with less than two months until the Spending Review on 11 June, we will be accelerating our lobbying with the Government to reiterate the evidence, asks and recommendations set out in our comprehensive submission (see **first** 703).



Finally, I'm delighted that Impact: The Local Government Graduate Scheme, run by the LGA, has been officially recognised as one of the top 50 graduate employers in the country in The Times newspaper's Top 100.

Following a rebrand, Impact received a record number of applications this year from graduates eager to work in our sector, and who will provide a pipeline of future leadership talent to help us make the most of all the challenges and opportunities we face.



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

The biggest power grab in decades

The Government's Planning and Infrastructure Bill will do little to get spades in the ground and increase England's housing supply.

It represents one of the biggest power grabs from councils in decades and will strip councillors of their democratic rights to make decisions on some of the most contentious planning applications that impact our communities.

"Mandatory housing targets are nothing more than a gimmick"

The last Conservative government rightfully abolished mandatory housing targets, recognising that it is not councils that are blocking development. Indeed, 87 per cent of applications that come before councils are approved.

Mandatory housing targets are nothing more than a gimmick given that most councils, through no fault of their own, will struggle to meet those targets.

We must question why it is that more than a million homes with approval are yet to be built. The answer? Because developers simply aren't building out what they have received permission to build.

Introducing a national scheme of delegation on what applications our committees can and cannot decide is redundant. Why should a Whitehall official dictate this?

And if they want to deliver housing, why doesn't the bill get rid of arcane EU nutrient neutrality regulations, which will release £18 billion to the economy and increase supply by 41,000 homes a year.

If Labour wants to deliver growth, it should step away, give us the freedoms we need, and let us get on with the job.



Councillor Bridget Smith is Deputy Leader of the LGA's Liberal Democrat Group

Auto enrol children for free school meals

I was delighted to see that another Liberal Democrat-led council's scheme helping more than 2,400 children receive a free school meal has been made permanent.

Eligible children have been auto enrolled for a meal since the start of a trial in September, and the council has confirmed it will continue to do so permanently.

Primary and secondary head teachers had supported the scheme, saying it was "the way forward" and alleviated pressure on families and staff.

Over 2024/25, an additional 2,469 children benefited, with the council calculating that signing up for a free meal saves families an average of £400 per child per year.

The move also brought in extra funds for the council's schools through the Government's pupil premium grant, with an estimated £3.5 million unlocked.

There are now a number of councils that auto enrol for free school meals, including, for example, the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames – and more councils need to do this.

"Signing up for a free meal saves families an average of £400 per child per year"

The Government also needs to reconsider the extremely low income threshold of £7,400 that prevents more than 900,000 children who are living below the poverty line from accessing a free school meal.

However, it was extremely disappointing to see Labour MPs voting against Liberal Democrat MP Munira Wilson's proposal to make auto enrolment for free school meals mandatory.

GROUP LEADERS



Councillor Caroline Jackson is Deputy Leader of the LGA's Independent Group

People need a healthy home and environment

With the Planning and Infrastructure Bill in its committee stage, we have to counter the myth that there is the economy or the environment.

And that when it comes to planning, people can either have homes or a healthy environment.

People need homes, not just houses, and they need a well-planned community and a rich, diverse and flourishing environment in which to live; there for them, their children and the whole planet.

Seeing 'environmental targets' as barriers to growth and development misses the point; targets help us to focus our actions on protecting our environment for everyone.

"Seeing environmental targets as barriers to growth misses the point"

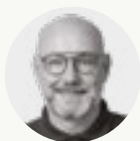
We need to acknowledge our collective responsibility, and we do that through democracy.

Whether it's planning or local government reorganisation, people have the right to have a say over major changes to their communities.

If democracy is seen as an inconvenience to the 'smooth running of things', then we really are in trouble.

This year, democracy has already been deemed 'unnecessarily costly' as local elections were cancelled, or postponed, removing the ability of the public to hold their elected members to account through the ballot box.

The message the public is hearing is that their vote, and voting, doesn't matter. As I knock on doors in Lancashire, the disturbing message coming back repeatedly, is: "I'm not voting this time; it doesn't make any difference." ●



Councillor Leigh Redman (Lab)
is Chair of Somerset Council's
Children and Families
Scrutiny Committee

One of the biggest budget pressures on upper-tier councils today is home-to-school transport.

Provision of school transport is a statutory duty, with the impact and costs most heavily borne by geographically large, often rural counties; nine of the top 10 highest-spending councils were large, non-urban councils; the other was Birmingham.

Those counties face two key challenges: a higher proportion of their school-age children live beyond the statutory walking distance from their nearest school; and the children often have limited (if any) public transport networks that meet their required travel times.

Consequently, these councils are often reliant on contracting from the external market, at significant cost.

Somerset has seen its school transport costs rise in recent years, particularly in relation to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as demand for specialist provision has amplified already challenging inflationary impacts.

Since 2020/21, Somerset's SEND transport spend has more than doubled from £5.13 million. In 2024/25, it was projected to increase to £13.36 million – but, in October 2024, we projected a year-end spend of £12.52 million.

This welcome news came as a direct result of a dedicated school transport project designed to identify potential efficiencies and reduce the



School transport project tackles budget pressures

rate at which SEND transport costs increase in the future.

The officer-led project, supported by senior leaders and members, began in October 2023, and has focused on a number of key areas, including live data, procurement, taxi licensing, market engagement, personal budgets, travel training, and internal fleet efficiencies.

The main driver for the project is the need to reduce the rate at which the SEND transport budget is increasing, rather than unrealistically trying to reduce the budget, given the ongoing challenges around demand.

By 2027/28, Somerset was projecting to spend £16.57 million on SEND transport, but as a result of the

project, it now has a mitigated projection of £14.91 million.

Each topic area has had its own successes. For example, we used live data to rapidly identify and review batches of the most expensive routes (by per pupil cost). Of the 40 reviewed in the first exercise, 29 were changed in some way, either by amalgamating or retendering.

This project has generated some significant savings and is well ahead of the ambitious targets set for it.

Having made the case to not procure external support and opting to lead their own project, the incredible officer capability we have in local government has been highlighted.

I am proud of the amazing

work our officers do, particularly in these times of pressured budgets; too often we are too quick to accept pressures that are perceived to be 'outside of our control'.

I want to champion our officers and use this article to offer options to other authorities that might be able to benefit from our success.

Our local government family should champion the great work of our officers and share any benefits to help others better manage budgets – and, in this case, help make statutory spend more efficient.

The project team have agreed to respond to questions from other authorities. Please contact Phil Curd, Head of Education Places, at phil.curd@somerset.gov.uk ●

A blueprint for electoral reform



Peter Stanyon is Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators

As the first set of scheduled polls since the 2024 general election, the 1 May local elections are a move back to electoral 'business as usual'. We strongly believe now is the time to improve that business for everyone involved.

If candidate nominations could be submitted online, postal vote applications closed earlier in the timetable, and polling day held at the weekend, there would be benefits all round.

These are just a few of the electoral reform ideas outlined in the Association of Electoral Administrators' (AEA's) 'New blueprint for a modern electoral landscape'.

Drawing on the experience of frontline electoral administrators, it outlines more than 50 recommendations for positive change, including:

- an earlier postal vote application deadline of 16 working days before a poll, rather than 11, allowing more time to print, send and return postal voting packs
- considering whether shorter polling hours, weekend voting and larger voting hubs for wider areas – as opposed to more and smaller polling stations – would help voters and increase turnout
- simplifying the candidate nominations process by removing subscriber requirements and reviewing candidate deposit amounts
- reviewing legislation allowing students and second homeowners to register to vote at two addresses
- considering the abolition of burdensome and costly neighbourhood planning referendums.

We also call on governments to bring resilience and capacity to elections by implementing:



- an independent Royal or Parliamentary commission to review core election delivery processes
- a review of all existing electoral law to produce a single Electoral Administration Act that respects devolved nation differences
- a review of supplier capacity to identify and mitigate against potential risk, particularly around print and postal services.

Like the LGA, we are concerned about levels of abuse and intimidation around elections – whether aimed at candidates, campaigners, electoral registration officers (EROs), returning officers (ROs), electoral administrators or polling station workers.

The Elections Act 2022 introduced a new penalty for intimidatory behaviour towards candidates and campaigners.

We continue to call for legislation to include ROs, EROs and their staff. Not to do so would be unconscionable given the experiences many have suffered in recent years.

With voting from age 16 coming to England, and UK polls and new local authorities on the cards for swathes of England, we can't continue bolting 21st-century voter expectations on to 19th-century infrastructure.

The risk of failure increases with every change made.

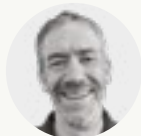
Also, as every elected member and returning officer knows, elections run all year round. Simplification of legislation, systems and processes is needed more than ever.

Whether a poll is small and local, or high-profile and national, we all want to see safe, secure and accurate elections in which the public has trust.

Our report suggests ways to make sure that, working together as a sector, we can continue to deliver just that. ●

i The AEA's 'New blueprint for a modern electoral landscape' can be downloaded for free at www.aea-elections.co.uk/blueprint2025

Improving young people's wellbeing



James Robertson is the National Director of #BeeWell

#BeeWell is a youth-centred programme that exists to improve the wellbeing of young people across England.

#BeeWell was co-founded by The University of Manchester, The Gregson Family Foundation, and Anna Freud, a mental health charity for children and young people, which, together with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority,

launched the programme in 2021.

The programme expanded into Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton (HIPS) in 2023.

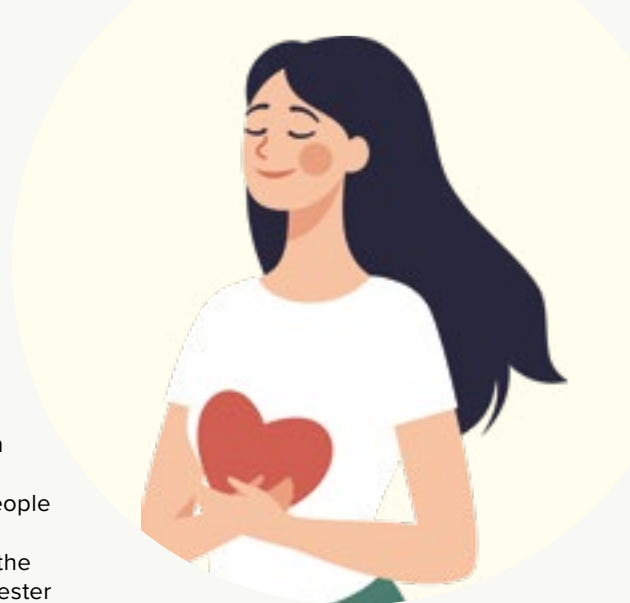
We listen to the voices of young people through our annual wellbeing survey delivered with secondary schools in the 14 local authorities of Greater Manchester and HIPS.

Since 2021, the survey has been completed by more than 130,000 young people across almost 300 schools. Other locations, like Havering (see below), are adapting the survey to meet their own ambitions for their young people.

We publish the results privately to schools and publicly by neighbourhood, working with local young people, schools,

charities, local government and health systems to act on the results.

Together with our partners, we are running a campaign – ‘Our wellbeing, our voice’ – to persuade central government to implement wellbeing measurement throughout England. You can find out more at ourwellbeingourvoice.org ●



Insights from Havering



Councillor Oscar Ford (Residents' Association) is Cabinet Member for Children and Young People at the London Borough of Havering

Havering Council has taken a significant step towards understanding and improving the wellbeing of its young residents through the Havering Youth Wellbeing Census.

This initiative, adapted in collaboration with the health innovation partnership UCL Partners, local young people, and the organisations that support them, aims to amplify the voices of young people and address their needs

through data-driven insights and community engagement.

Critical insights into the lives of adolescents in the borough include that girls' psychological wellbeing is three points lower than boys'.

There is variation in how young people perceive crime, with those living in the north most concerned about gang activity and drug-related problems.

Discrimination based on race, skin colour, or place of birth is the most commonly experienced by young people.

Students with special educational needs and eligible for free school meals experience discrimination more than their peers.

Havering's new 'Integrated Starting Well Plan' prioritises children's wellbeing and draws upon the census results, centring young people's voices.

The council and partners are using the findings to foster positive youth-led change, exploring the results with young people and agreeing priorities for action.

The borough is addressing issues identified by:

- using the findings to inform Havering's emotional health and wellbeing strategy for children and young people, and shaping the offer of mental health support teams in schools
- acting to enhance community safety, focusing on areas where young people have expressed concerns about crime and gang activity
- using the results in delivering Havering's

culture strategy, focusing on promoting inclusivity, ensuring all young people feel valued and supported.

Havering's Youth Wellbeing Census is helping us take proactive steps to create a safer, more inclusive, and supportive environment for young people.

We hope we are setting a precedent for other local authorities to follow. We fully support the 'Our wellbeing, our voice' campaign (see above).

We all want children to thrive, and to support them, we must understand the complex factors that affect their wellbeing, putting their voices and lived experience at the heart of policy-making.



See <https://moredetails.uk/420qGab> for more on Havering's 'Integrated Starting Well Plan'

Strengthening partnership working in children's social care



Councillor Jacqui Coogan (Lab) is Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education at the City of Wolverhampton Council

The Department for

Education's Families First for Children Pathfinder (FFCP) programme is designed to test ways to reform the children's social care system.

It aims to help children stay with their families in safe and loving homes, while protecting vulnerable children where needed and ensuring that families receive the right support at the right time, and that they are supported by the right professional.

Wolverhampton – one of three local authorities chosen to take part in the first phase of the pathfinder – is working to give support to families based on three principles.

The first is delivering family help through local multi-disciplinary teams, working with partners to provide welcoming and effective support, tailored to the needs of children and families.

Then, where child protection is necessary, ensuring it is carried out by social workers with the required expertise, experience and time to dedicate to the family and child.

The third principle is making greater use of family networks, involving the wider family in decision-making,



with them being the first port of call if a child has to leave the family home.

There is also enhanced engagement with extended family members and friends to build long-term resilience, with a genuine focus on family-led planning.

Seven more councils joined the pathfinder in the second phase last year, and funding for the programme has now been extended for a further 12 months.

One of our top priorities as a council is to ensure our children and young people get the best possible start in life, so we are very pleased to be a part of this important piece of work.

The FFCP programme aims to help children and families facing challenges by giving them the right help at the right time, by ensuring early support, family help and intervention is available to help them

overcome adversity and stay together where possible.

We are sharing our learning through regular meetings with the Department for Education and policy leads from across government departments, as well as presenting at national public learning events and conferences.

The Government's new Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which began its journey through Parliament in December, shows a clear commitment to rolling out social care reform nationally; findings from the pathfinder will be used to help shape these reforms.

This means that, thanks to our involvement with the pathfinder, we – and the children and families we support – will be able to directly influence the national rollout of reforms to children's social care.

We will continue to monitor the impact of the reforms locally, with a clear focus on getting direct feedback from families.

Early impacts seen so far include a reduction in repeat referrals to social care, improved quality of child protection planning, and positive feedback from frontline staff across the partnership about feeling upskilled and open to testing out the new model.

It is vital to build on the work undertaken, continuing our strengthened partnership working alongside ensuring effective changes continue in areas such as workforce development and recruitment.

We must ensure that these improvements are sustainable, so that families' experiences of services continue to be as positive and effective as possible. ●

Embedding health into planning



Matthew Morgan is Director and Co-founder of the Quality of Life Foundation

The places in which we live, work and socialise have a profound impact on our health. From access to green space and active travel, to the quality of housing and community infrastructure, the built environment plays a crucial role in shaping our wellbeing.

Yet, too often, health and wellbeing are treated as afterthoughts in planning, rather than a fundamental priority.

Paragraph 96 of the revised National Planning Policy Framework makes clear that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve places that enable healthier lives and reduce health inequalities. But

translating that ambition into practice can be challenging, particularly in the face of tight budgets, competing priorities, and the complexity of the planning system.

One practical tool available to councils are design codes. These set clear expectations for the design of new developments and can be used to ensure places are optimised to support people's health and wellbeing. Developed in collaboration with employee-owned planning and urban design company Tibbalds, our new guidance, 'Design Codes for Health and Wellbeing', provides a framework for embedding health into the design-coding process.

By taking this approach, councils can use planning to address local health and wellbeing challenges – whether that's tackling air pollution, improving access to nature, or ensuring that housing and public spaces encourage social connection.

Design codes offer clarity for developers and can help create places that actively support better health outcomes, while also



delivering high-quality, sustainable growth.

Councils have a crucial role in ensuring that health is central to planning and development. By integrating health and wellbeing into design codes, we can create communities where people not only live, but thrive. ●

i 'Design Codes for Health and Wellbeing' can be downloaded free at www.qolf.org/what-we-do/design-codes-for-health-and-wellbeing

Performing arts for young people in care



Gavin Oldham is Chair of Trustees at the Share Foundation

There's something extraordinary about the performing arts that is hard to find in any other discipline.

The sheer enjoyment of working together, the bubbling enthusiasm and optimism that increase personal confidence, resilience and communication skills – these are skills that are eminently transferable into other fields and walks of life.

This is why we have launched 'Stepping Forward: Performing Arts for Life' with Tring Park School for the Performing Arts and the Rothschild Foundation, to offer an incredible opportunity for some of the UK's most disadvantaged people.

It is a first-of-its-kind online performing arts video course, to provide young people in care, aged 13-17, with an accessible introduction to the performing arts.

The programme delves into four disciplines – dance, acting, singing and backstage technical skills – with those taking part gaining hands-on experience through workshops

and an in-depth discussion on backstage roles.

Participants will also be able to earn up to £200, with £25 on offer for each stage completed and a bonus of £50 for full completion of all six steps.

Incentivised learning has been shown to provide real attitudinal transformation – and this will not only provide financial benefits for these young people, but it will also support their skills, knowledge and understanding of what is required by employers now and in the future.

Local authorities with an interest in expanding their performing arts initiatives can sign up to offer Stepping

Forward. Already, 49 are set to offer the programme across England, Scotland and Wales.

Local authorities will find that the new course complements well the Share Foundation's Stepladder Plus programme (see www.sharefound.org/stepladder-of-achievement).

Whereas Stepladder Plus is focused on financial awareness and life skills that support independence, Stepping Forward offers the opportunity to increase self-confidence and communication skills through the performing arts.

The course is accessible to young people in care for free through the local authorities that sign up. ●

i If you are a local authority that would like to get involved or find out further information, visit www.sharefound.org/steppingforward or contact the Stepping Forward programme coordinator, josie.rylance@sharefound.org

60 seconds with...

Councillor Brian Williams

Councillor Brian Williams (Con) is standing down on 1 May, aged 90, having served on six councils since 1960. He is currently Vice Chairman of Shropshire Council and Chair of its Audit Committee

Why did you become a councillor?

I trained as an accountant, but changed career in my 20s to become a civil engineer, and subsequently had my own construction business, specialising in roads and bridges. I became a councillor because I was a politically active Young Conservative, and a vacancy occurred in the ward in which I lived. I saw this as an opportunity to become involved in public service while still maintaining my business career.

How are things better or worse since you first became a councillor?

Sadly, much worse, because councils then were well funded through domestic and

business rates, and could maintain standards of provision and maintenance of services that are impossible today with the growth in the cost of care for the elderly and for children's services.

Would you recommend the role to others?

If you can stand the frustration of not being able to get things done for your residents because of financial constraints, it is still rewarding for the advice you can offer them and the policies you can contribute to as a member of the council.

What advice would you give newly elected members?

Get to know the senior officers across your council and build a sound working relationship with them while understanding the limitations of their roles. Their advice and knowledge can help you a lot in dealing with residents' problems.

What's your proudest achievement as a councillor?

Of the six councils on which I have served – four of which were dissolved (Prestwich Borough, Greater Manchester County, North Shropshire District and Shropshire County), one on which I lost my seat (Manchester City), and the one from which I am

retiring (Shropshire), there has never been anything but regret from residents, officers, parish councillors and even political opponents that the working relationship is ending. They have all expressed warmth and respect for the way in which I have tried to serve the community.

What advice would you give to councils currently going through local government reorganisation?

Once reorganisation has been announced, members should start to plan the structure of the new larger council immediately, so that senior officers can be appointed to 'shadow' roles and staff appointed to move seamlessly into the new organisations. Don't let political differences cause delay!

What does the future hold for the sector?

As an essential part of the governance structure of the country, it must be supported by central government with long-term financial help to enable councils to plan their finances several years ahead. Local government

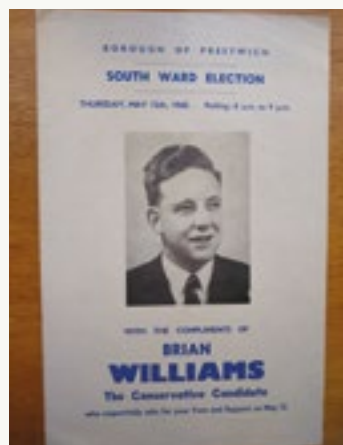


Cllr Brian Williams

has been bedevilled for years by 'short-termism' from central government.

What are your plans for the future?

I have a lifelong interest in canals, having had many narrowboat holidays and now walking the towpaths. I am a trustee of the Montgomery Canal Restoration Trust and, last year, I was elected to the council of the Canal & River Trust for a four-year term, until I am 93. If then still in good health and mind, I will hope to serve another term. ●



Brian's election poster from 1960

i Do you know of an older serving councillor than Cllr Williams, and/or someone who was elected prior to 1960? Please email karen.thornton@local.gov.uk

More candidates contesting vacancies



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

Recent by-elections show a trend towards higher candidate numbers: almost half the contests last year had five or more candidates on the ballot.

This year, that proportion has risen to almost 60 per cent, largely because Reform is now contesting more vacancies.

Nominations for the 1 May elections, too, show Reform

leading the way with 1,630 candidates for the 1,641 seats on offer, a 99.3 per cent contestation rate.

Conservatives and Labour are not far behind, with Liberal Democrats, Greens and Independents very much in evidence.

Such fierce competition is likely to reduce the threshold of support required to win a seat and many contests could be decided by fine margins.

With the Conservatives almost certain to lose council seats and control of councils on 1 May, the media focus will be there – but Labour's support is worthy of attention, especially in areas where many

of its general election gains were recorded.

Labour lost all five of its recent local by-election defences, bringing losses since last July to 43 from 95 seats. It is the worst by-election performance for any government elected with a 100-plus parliamentary majority in its first year of office. The Liberal Democrats, Reform UK, Greens and an Independent all took advantage of Labour vulnerability.

Liberal Democrats gained two Labour seats, in Lincoln and Neath Port Talbot respectively. Last July, it was Labour's Hamish Falconer,



whose father served in Tony Blair's Cabinet, who took Lincoln's parliamentary seat.

The vacancy in the city's Park ward arose following the death of Cllr Sue Burke, a councillor since 2012 and twice Lincoln's mayor. Labour then selected her son, Sean Burke-Ulyat, as its candidate to replace her, but his vote share collapsed.

Labour's decline in Neath Port Talbot's Cwmllynfell and Ystalyfera ward was even more spectacular, a 33-point swing to the Liberal Democrats accounting for this loss.

But on the same day as these victories, the Liberal Democrats lost St Helens' Sutton South East ward to Reform.

In 2022, Liberal Democrat Brian Spencer topped the poll, with Labour only able to claim the second seat. Cllr Spencer's death prompted the by-election, but his personal vote did not transfer and Reform was able to make its





second by-election gain in the borough, with Blackbrook ward captured from Labour at the end of last year.

The Conservatives are making a habit of taking seats off the Liberal Democrats in Three Rivers' Abbots Langley and Bedmond ward.

Formerly, local electors had been firm in their choice, re-electing Liberal Democrats over a long period. But a reported disagreement between two of the ward's councillors and fellow Liberal Democrats saw the resignation of Matthew Bedford and the subsequent loss of his seat in a by-election last August. His wife Sue Bedford's resignation in January prompted a second contest, with that too gifting the Conservatives another seat.

Three defeats, two in London boroughs, highlight weaknesses among Labour's electoral base.

Redbridge's Mayfield ward vacancy arose following the resignation of former

council leader Cllr Jas Athwal, elected for the Ilford South constituency last July.

Unusually in that election, Labour's vote was 25-points lower, largely because of votes cast for Independent Noor Begum. She, along with others, subsequently established the Ilford Independents and it was Begum who spearheaded the campaign that overturned Labour's 55 per cent majority in Mayfield.

The vacancy in Haringey's St Ann's ward arose when Tammy Hymas resigned after cuts in the borough's budget were announced.

The Greens, who missed winning a ward seat by fewer than 100 votes in 2022, selected Ruairidh Paton as their candidate. He received public backing from Haringey's Independent Socialists group, comprising former Labour councillors who resigned over Keir Starmer's policies.

It is unclear whether it was his party label or this

endorsement that tipped the scales in Paton's favour, but his win was emphatic, polling almost twice as many votes as did Labour.

Labour's troubles were also evident when it failed to retain a safe seat in Tameside's Longdendale ward.

A group of Labour councillors were caught up in the controversy over a WhatsApp group, that included local MP Andrew Gwynne. Gwynne was sacked from his ministerial post, while the councillors had the Labour whip withdrawn.

Additionally, two Longdendale ward councillors left the party, citing disaffection with Labour's policies. One of these resulted in this vacancy.

Cue the appearance of Reform candidate Allan Hopwood, who polled almost half the votes, taking full advantage of Labour discomfort while also squeezing the Conservative and Green vote. ●

● See p30

By-election results

East Devon, Exe Valley

LIB DEM HELD

20.4% over Con | Turnout **28.7%**

Gwynedd, Teigi

PLAID HELD

45.8% over Ind | Turnout **40.7%**

Harborough, Glen

CON HELD

68.5% over Lib Dem | Turnout **22.8%**

Haringey, St Ann's

GREEN GAIN FROM LAB

24.6% over Lab | Turnout **33.0%**

Lincoln, Park

LIB DEM GAIN FROM LAB

8.4% over Lab | Turnout **15.7%**

Maldon, Maldon North

CON HELD

4.7% over Lib Dem | Turnout **33.2%**

Mole Valley, Holmwoods and Beare Green

LIB DEM HELD

24.0% over Con | Turnout **18.7%**

Neath Port Talbot, Cwmllynfell and Ystalyfera

LIB DEM GAIN FROM LAB

3.8% over Plaid | Turnout **34.2%**

North Kesteven, Bracebridge Heath

CON HELD

2.4% over Ref | Turnout **20.5%**

Redbridge, Mayfield

ILFORD IND GAIN FROM LAB

16.4% over Lab | Turnout **24.7%**

St Helens, Sutton South East

REF GAIN FROM LIB DEM

8.3% over Lab | Turnout **17.8%**

Sutton, Sutton Central

LIB DEM HELD

41.6% over Con | Turnout **27.3%**

Swansea, Penllergaer

IND HELD

50.2% over Lib Dem | Turnout **34.0%**

Tameside, Longdendale

REF GAIN FROM LAB

21.6% over Lab | Turnout **20.1%**

Three Rivers, Abbots Langley and Bedmond

CON GAIN FROM LIB DEM

6.4% over Lib Dem | Turnout **33.6%**

i For more information on all recent by-elections, please visit lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections

May Day: local and mayoral elections preview



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

Many of the Conservative councillors who face re-election on 1 May have benefited from events.

In 2017, in the midst of a general election campaign, their party gained hundreds of seats. In 2021, the so-called 'vaccine bounce' helped the Conservatives, under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to win nearly two-thirds of all vacancies as they registered their best local election performance since 2008.

Now things look rather different. The party continues to struggle to recover from its 2024 general election defeat and although recently it has been making net gains in council by-elections, these have tended to be in places where the comparison is with the depths of the Truss/Sunak era, rather than the sunny uplands of 2021.

The total number of Conservative councillors is at its lowest for a quarter of a century and looks set to fall further – not that Labour is well placed to take full advantage.

Sir Keir Starmer's 'new' government is not so new, the shire county and unitary elections largely take place well outside the Labour heartlands, and the party has problems of its own with internal dissent over policies varying from Gaza, through winter fuel payments, to benefit cuts. Indeed, it has lost more than 100 councillors since last May through defections and by-election defeats.

The trials of the two main parties open the door to their rivals on both the left and right. The Liberal Democrats and Greens will expect to make progress in some of the more affluent suburbs and county towns



of southern England; Reform UK is poised to shake up the establishment in rural and coastal areas in particular. And never forget the Independents and community groups, whose numbers have been rising in response to a general anti-politics mood and who now comprise more than 10 per cent of councillors in England.

Following the postponement of contests pending local government reorganisation in seven counties and two unitary authorities, 12 million electors (around a third of the English total) have a vote to choose 1,641 councillors across 23 local authorities. Accounting for boundary changes in 11 councils, the Conservatives defend just less than 1,000 seats from 2021, Labour about 300, the Liberal Democrats 200 and the Greens fewer than 50.

In 2021, the Conservatives won three-quarters or more of the seats in six of the 14 counties where elections have survived, yet can be certain of retaining a majority in none of them.

Labour is unlikely to win anywhere outright. Its best chance on paper is Lancashire, where control would be flipped if 11 seats were gained on a direct

swing of a little more than 5 per cent from the Conservatives. But that straightforward calculation discounts the potential and often unpredictable impact of other parties.

Nottinghamshire is another county that has often been run by Labour. Here, though, the party's prospects have long been damaged by the success of Independents and, at the general election, Reform, in its former stronghold of Ashfield.

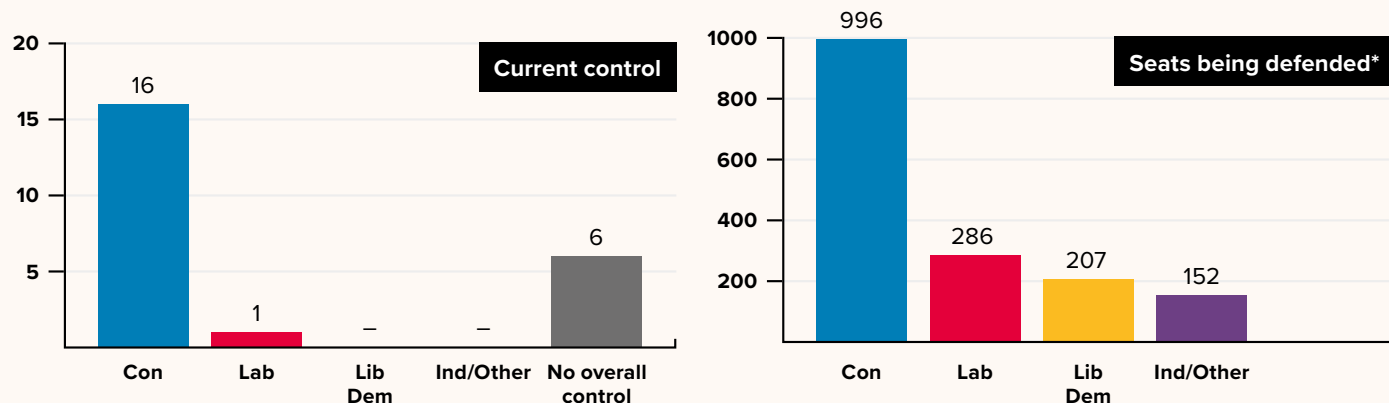
In Kent and Lincolnshire, Reform poses the greatest threat to what, on paper, look like unassailable Conservative majorities. There is a legacy of strong UKIP support from 2013, with that party topping the poll then in Swale and Thanet (Kent), and in Boston and South Holland (Lincolnshire).

Labour is also, in principle, vulnerable to Reform here, but its weakness at these elections is reflected in the fact that it defends just 11 seats across both counties.

The Liberal Democrats are currently the second party in Cambridgeshire, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire (all under no overall control), and in Hertfordshire. All present opportunities for seat gains, building on recent district council and general election successes.

England local elections 2025

1,641* seats in 23 councils (11 with boundary changes) comprising 1 metropolitan borough, 8 unitary authorities and 14 county councils.



*accounting for boundary changes but not casual vacancies/defections

The Conservatives dominate most of the eight unitary authorities with elections, too.

Boundary changes in six of them make precise comparisons difficult, but it is significant that the party polled well under half the vote last time, even in places such as Buckinghamshire and the two Northamptonshires, where it enjoys big majorities. A relatively modest swing could quickly alter the picture.

Labour lost control of County Durham – where the number of councillors has been reduced from 126 to 98 – for the first time in 100 years in 2021. To restore its position, the party faces the stiff task of winning back seats not so much from the Conservatives as from Independent groups now liberally scattered across the county. In its rear-view mirror too is Reform, which came second in five of seven constituencies last year.

The sole metropolitan borough that goes to the polls – and the sole Labour council being defended – is Doncaster.

UKIP came second here in 2014, with 32 per cent of the vote to Labour's 38 per cent, but topped the poll in just one ward. However, Nigel Farage's then party came second in a further 17 wards and that is the kind of foundation that Reform will attempt to build on in seeking to deprive Labour of control.

In addition, Ros Jones stands for re-election as Mayor, hoping that a recent

“Boundary changes in six of the eight unitary authorities make precise comparisons difficult”

announcement about the reopening of Doncaster Sheffield Airport (formerly known as Robin Hood Airport) will boost her support. Just to confuse matters, the Reform mayoral candidate is also called Jones!

In North Tyneside, the mayoral contest is a stand-alone event. Labour's Norma Redfearn has won a clear majority of votes cast here in each of the previous three occasions on which she has stood.

There are also four combined authority mayoral elections taking place on 1 May.

Labour defends the West of England area, where no Conservative MPs were elected in 2024. Despite Reform choosing the high-profile Aaron Banks as its candidate, this is a contest where both the Greens and Liberal Democrats have local strength and could have a role to play.

Labour only won Cambridgeshire and Peterborough in 2021 after the distribution of second preferences allowed the party to come from behind.

With Labour and the Liberal Democrats both gaining constituencies from the Conservatives last year, and with the

Fenland and Huntingdonshire districts, in particular, showing themselves as repositories of UKIP and Brexit support a decade ago, the election is likely to be closely fought.

The other two elections are inaugural contests on either side of the Humber estuary.

In the Hull and East Yorkshire area, two rather different authorities are combined. Hull City has no Conservative councillors, whereas the East Riding of Yorkshire Council has been under Conservative leadership (if not always majority control) since it was created in 1996.

The Greater Lincolnshire area is similarly an amalgam of rather different territories, both politically and socially.

North East Lincolnshire (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) has often voted Labour, though strongly supported Brexit in 2016; Lincolnshire County Council has been dominated by the Conservatives throughout its 50-year existence.

In parts of the county, though, Reform's threat to the mainstream is only too clear. In 2024, the party won the Boston and Skegness parliamentary constituency (previously the second-safest Conservative seat in the entire country). Reform's Andrea Jenkyns, previously Conservative MP for Morley and Outwood, cannot be ruled out. ●



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Cllr Liam Robinson

Leader, Liverpool City Council

Pete Gladwell

Group Managing Director,
Public Investments, Legal and General

Kate Kennelly

Chief Executive, Cornwall Council

Yvette Stanley

National Director, Social Care and Regulation, Ofsted

Vikki Slade MP

Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Housing,
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