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# LGA 21

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## A new year

I hope you found some time to relax over the festive period, as 2021 looks set to be as busy as 2020.

With the country in lockdown again, we have our latest COVID-19 updates (p4, p10), and provide some advice on adjusting commercial activities in response to the pandemic (p11).

The provisional local government finance settlement was published just before Christmas (see p12). The LGA is now focusing its attention on the Budget on 3 March, to ensure the vital role councils are playing in tackling the pandemic and supporting recovery is recognised with more investment.

We have features on the LGA's 'world class' leadership development programmes, particularly our long-running weekender for black, Asian and minority ethnic councillors (p14), and on how local authorities and NHS bodies in West Yorkshire and Harrogate are providing place-based leadership of local health and care services (p16).

Julie James MS, Minister for Housing and Local Government, writes about how the pandemic has strengthened the close working relationship between the Welsh Government and local authorities in Wales (p23).

And Lord Bird, Co-Founder of the Big Issue, suggests how we can 'commute with a conscience' (p27).

As ever, please follow the LGA at #LGAnews and #LGAcomms for our latest updates.

**Cllr James Jamieson**  
is LGA Chairman

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Editor Karen Thornton  
Design & print CPL [www.cpl.co.uk](http://www.cpl.co.uk)  
Advertising [andy.shields@cpl.co.uk](mailto:andy.shields@cpl.co.uk)

Write to first: Local Government Association  
18 Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ

Email [karen.thornton@local.gov.uk](mailto:karen.thornton@local.gov.uk)  
Tel editorial 07464 652610  
Tel advertising 01223 378 005

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## New national lockdown as vaccines rolled out

**As first was going to press, the country was starting another round of national lockdowns in response to surging hospital admissions and COVID-19 infection rates.**

Schools have closed and everyone in England must stay at home except for permitted reasons such as shopping for essentials, work (if they can't work from home) and exercise, until at least mid-February.

In Wales, 'stay at home' restrictions have

been in place since 20 December and education settings are closed until 18 January (see p5).

Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned the next few weeks would be the "hardest yet".

He said he hoped those in the top four priority groups – including all care home residents and their carers, frontline health and social care workers and the clinically extremely vulnerable – would receive a first

vaccine dose by the middle of next month.

LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson said the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines is a source of hope, but that vaccination plans need to be accelerated.

Local knowledge and expertise will be crucial in encouraging everyone to get vaccinated, and councils' unique relationship with the people they represent means they are well placed to reach out to those in the priority groups and beyond.

He added: "Another national lockdown will be tough for many, but infection rates are clearly rising out of control across the country and the Government is right to act.

"Councils will continue to step up to support residents, especially those who are more vulnerable, businesses and education settings.

"To help, the Government needs to ensure its £500 self-isolation payment support scheme is available to those in need of financial support as a result of the requirement to self-isolate. Councils also need adequate funding to provide discretionary support for those who fall outside the scope of the national scheme to prevent hardship and control the spread of the virus."

With councils facing huge cost pressures and significant income losses, the LGA is also calling for further funding to address remaining financial pressures in 2020/21.

● See p5, p10, p24



## Regulatory services 'under pressure' from EU transition

The LGA has warned that key local services on the frontline of the COVID-19 response face additional pressure as a result of the end of EU transition arrangements.

The EU and UK Government agreed a new post-Brexit trade deal last month, which was ratified by Parliament in an emergency sitting on 30 December.

The deal, which ensures there will be no tariffs or quotas on EU/UK trade in goods, includes a new agreement on fisheries, and makes state-aid and procurement UK domestic policies.

There is an agreement to

join some future EU funding programmes (for example, the Horizon research programme) and to leave others (such as the Erasmus education scheme).

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chair of the LGA's EU Exit Taskforce, said: "This new deal poses a number of opportunities and challenges for local councils.

"The end of the EU transition period and the start of the new trade arrangements will take place among multiple pressures on councils over the winter months.

"Our support for local communities against COVID-19 and our statutory services are a priority, and we have stated to

government that the capacity to undertake additional new work during this unprecedented period is severely limited."


He added: "Most of the immediate responsibilities from the ending of the EU transition period will fall on our regulatory services as a result of some new checks on goods at ports and the support needed for businesses.

"These members of staff are at the frontline of our work in the pandemic and are also having to deliver important statutory

services such as food hygiene and trading standards.

"Even with more funding made available and the support of the new Environmental Health Officer register, councils may find it hard to recruit for these positions in such a short space of time due to a national shortage of qualified staff."





## Provisional finance settlement published

**A**dditional funding for adult and children's social care and a new £111 million 'lower-tier services' grant for districts and unitaries were among the announcements in last month's provisional local government finance settlement for England.

But while the settlement envisages a potential 4.5 per cent increase in local government's core spending power, more than 85 per cent of that is dependent on councils increasing council tax by up to 5 per cent in 2021/22.

LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson warned this would leave councils facing a tough choice about whether to increase bills to protect vital local services when "we are acutely aware of the significant burden that could place on some households".

He added: "It is good to see that the provisional settlement provides extra money to meet COVID-19 costs, new funding for adult and children's social care, and for councils with responsibility for services such as

homelessness, planning, recycling and refuse collection, which will help meet cost and demand pressures next year.

"However, the ability to bring in extra council tax remains a sticking plaster and not a long-term solution. It falls short of the sustainable long-term funding that is needed to improve the services our communities and local economies will need to recover from the pandemic."

The LGA says councils need "clarity and certainty" about how all local services will be funded in the medium term. It is calling for a three-year settlement from 2022, and "meaningful progress" towards a long-term, sustainable solution to the adult social care funding crisis.

With the Budget scheduled for 3 March, the LGA will be making the case for investment in the council services that have been so crucial in the fight against COVID-19 and recovery.

● See p12-13, p24

## Schools closed and exams dropped

**T**he LGA has praised the work of school leaders and councils in switching overnight to remote learning for pupils, after the latest lockdown was announced on 4 January.

All schools and colleges in England are now closed, except to vulnerable youngsters and the children of key workers, until at least the February half-term, in response to rising COVID-19 infection rates and hospital admissions.

Writing on Twitter, LGA Chief Executive Mark Lloyd said: "School leaders – supported by teams in councils – moved mountains in just 12 hours overnight to switch on remote learning and make provision in schools for vulnerable children and those of critical workers.

"It's a massive and immediate switch that deserves recognition and praise."

Announcing the new lockdown measures and school closures, Prime Minister Boris Johnson also suggested that GCSE and A Level exams will not take place in England this summer. Exams watchdog Ofqual will make "alternative arrangements" for delivering results.

In Wales, which has been subject to 'stay at home' lockdown restrictions since 20 December, schools and colleges were told to move to online learning until 18 January.

Welsh ministers made the decision to scrap the 2021 exams last year, with students to have their GCSE, AS and A Level grades based on classroom assessments.

● Two-thirds of COVID-19 costs faced by schools in England are not being met by government support, according the Education Policy Institute think tank. The LGA has called for the Government's COVID-19 workforce fund, which helps with staff costs, to be extended into this year.

## Honours for public service

**Local government workers, firefighters, teachers, police officers and foster carers were among the public sector workers honoured by the Queen in the New Year Honours List 2021.**

Public sector workers made up 14.8 per cent of the 1,239 recipients on the list, which was also the most ethnically diverse set of honours to date, with 14.2 per cent of recipients coming from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background.

Honours for elected members included an OBE for Cllr Azhar Ali, Leader of Lancashire County Council's Labour Group, for services to the community in North West England; an



MBE for Cllr David Skinner (Con, Coventry), for services to the community in Coventry; and a BEM for Cllr Paul Loble (Lab, Amber Valley), Ripley town councillor and former town mayor, also for services to the community.

Irene Lucas-Hays CBE, former Chief

Executive of Sunderland City Council and South Tyneside Metropolitan Council, was made a Dame Commander (DBE) for services to training, education and young people.

David Pearson CBE, former Director of Adult Social Care and Health at Nottinghamshire County Council, was knighted for services to health and social care integration.

There were also CBEs for Professor Graeme Betts, Birmingham City Council's Director of Adult Social Care, for services to adult social care; and for Pat Ritchie, Chief Executive of Newcastle City Council, for services to local government and public service reform.

## In brief

### Early years

The Early Years Local Government Programme has helped councils improve services and prospects for children and families, an independent external evaluation has found. The programme includes a peer review, designed and led by the LGA and the Early Intervention Foundation, in partnership with the Department for Education. An evaluation of the peer review strand by Ecorys found that 96 per cent of participating councils had implemented some or all of the recommendations received, while the range of expertise in the peer review teams was seen as a major strength of the programme. Councils said funding was crucial to successfully implementing some of the recommendations. **See p19**

## Looked after

There was a 2 per cent annual rise in the number of looked-after children in England during 2019/20, new government figures show. Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said councils are now looking after nearly 16,000 more children than they were 10 years ago, during which time they have lost £15 billion in core government funding. She said: "While the additional investment announced in the Spending Review was helpful, what is urgently needed is a long-term sustainable funding solution that enables councils to protect children at immediate risk of harm, while also supporting early intervention to prevent problems escalating in the first place."

## Child hunger

More than 1.9 million children in the UK went short of food last year, according to the Social Market Foundation think tank. Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Resources Board, said councils have worked hard with their partners to support disadvantaged children and families during the pandemic. Councils used the Government's £170 million winter funding package to help provide and oversee support to ensure children did not go hungry in the Christmas holidays and will not in the February half-term. He added: "It is also vital that the Government restores local welfare funding so councils can provide preventative support to families who need it."

# Pandemic leaves 'legacy of abuse'

School closures during the first national lockdown had a dramatic impact on the number of child-protection referrals made to local authorities, leaving them with a "legacy of abuse and neglect" to respond to.

Inspection agency Ofsted's annual report also says that while the number of referrals rose after schools reopened, it had yet to return to previous levels – raising fears that abuse could be going undetected.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "This report is extremely concerning and reinforces issues we have previously highlighted, including the significant pressures that children's services are under."

"As the impact of the pandemic becomes clear, councils expect to see a significant rise in referrals to children's social care and demand for wider children's support services."

"The extra funding for adult and children's social care

announced in the recent Spending Review is positive, but will not, on its own, be enough... Significant additional funding for children's social care will be needed if we are to provide the support children, young people and their families need, when they need it."

"This includes early help funding to avoid families reaching crisis point, and sufficient funding for those children and families who need more intensive child-protection responses. As a starting point, the £1.7 billion removed from the Early Intervention Grant since 2010 should be reinstated."

Amanda Spielman, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Children's Social Care, paid tribute to teachers, social workers, childminders, leaders and everyone working in education and children's social care, and thanked them for "going above and beyond in the most trying circumstances, and continuing to put children and young people first".



# Guidance for children in care

**The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has urged councils to scrutinise services for children in care, in a report that highlights the experiences of looked-after children.**

Cases shared in the report include a young man left never knowing if he was deprived of the chance to say goodbye to his dying mother when he was younger, a teenager returning to her foster home to find her bags packed as she'd turned 18, and siblings removed without warning from the foster parents who wanted to adopt them.

The ombudsman's report aims to promote best practice for local authorities and suggests questions that council scrutiny committees can ask to ensure their

authorities are providing the best services they can to children in their care.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said councils "work extremely hard to ensure that all children in care get the love and support they need to flourish", and the report would help councils continuously improve to achieve this goal.

She added: "Unfortunately, many councils are being pushed to the brink by unprecedented demand and increasing financial pressures, with an average of 87 children now taken into care every single day. There has been a 28 per cent increase in the number of children in care over the past decade, during which time councils lost £15 billion in core government funding."



# A million homes 'awaiting development'

**New analysis by the LGA suggests more than a million homes on land earmarked for development by councils have yet to be brought forward by developers for planning permission.**

The analysis, compiled after a survey of council heads of planning, estimates that more than a third (1,003,600) of the 2,676,200 homes allocated in current local plans in England have not been submitted to the planning system.

This amounts to 4.4 years' worth of housing supply, in addition to those already granted planning permission and schemes under construction.

The LGA says this is further evidence that councils are allocating enough land to deliver a housing pipeline for many years ahead and that planning is not a barrier to building the homes the country desperately needs.

It is calling on the Government to introduce measures to tackle a "broken" housing-delivery system, and to give councils the powers to incentivise developers to bring allocated sites forward without delay or intervene where development has stalled.

This could include making it easier to compulsory purchase land where homes remain unbuilt, and to be able to charge developers full council tax for every



unbuilt development that is not built out to agreed timescales.

Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "This is another example of our broken housing-delivery system, and shows why councils need to be given the powers to ensure desperately needed homes are getting built in a swift and timely manner.

"Councils are committed to working with government to see an efficient, well-resourced planning system that ensures high-quality affordable homes are built where they are most needed, supported by the right infrastructure."

## Housing need formula to be revised

The Government has said it will update its housing need formula to enable the delivery of new homes and meet its target of building 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s.

This will result in the prioritisation of brownfield sites and urban areas, with the plans encouraging more homes to be built in England's 20 biggest cities.

The Government also says it intends to revise the '80/20 rule', which guides how much funding is available to local areas to build new homes. It says this will help level up all parts of the country, rather than just concentrating funding in London and the South East.

The Government is due to launch a new £100 million brownfield land-release fund

to support brownfield development, estates regeneration, and development on public sector land. The updated formula follows strong lobbying by the LGA and councils, which had warned that previous proposals would have resulted in fewer homes being built in the north.

Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "We have been clear all along that algorithms and formulas can never be a substitute for local knowledge and decision-making by councils and communities who know their areas best.

"It is right that councils should have access to funding to support their ambitions, as they are in the best position to determine local housing need, instead of this being prescribed centrally."

## In brief Starter homes

The Government has "failed" to deliver 200,000 discounted starter homes promised for first-time buyers in 2015, and "never put in place the necessary laws to make the affordable homes initiative a reality", according to the Public Accounts Committee. It is calling on ministers to clarify how they will achieve their ambition of 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "To build the homes the country needs, the Government must hand councils the powers to build at a scale not seen since the 1970s, when local authorities built 40 per cent of new homes."

## Homeless deaths

There were an estimated 778 deaths of homeless people in England and Wales registered in 2019, according to the Office for National Statistics. This was an increase of 7.2 per cent from 2018, and the highest number since the data was first collected in 2013. Drug poisoning accounted for 37.1 per cent of deaths and nearly one in seven was attributed to suicide. Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "These tragic figures are made worse by the fact that many of these deaths are likely to have been preventable. More than a third of deaths related to drug poisoning deepens our concern about no new public health funding being announced in the recent Spending Review for 2021/22. This is a false economy that will only compound pressures on acute services."

## Local elections

The Electoral Commission has published guidance to help electoral administrators prepare for and deliver the May 2021 local elections. Further guidance is available on the LGA's COVID-19 elections hub (see [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-service-information](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-service-information)). The LGA is keen to make the case to government around the additional costs that these elections will incur. If your council is making financial decisions about venues, staffing and equipment now, please ensure they are included in your council's financial returns and consider sharing these with the LGA by emailing [jessica.norman@local.gov.uk](mailto:jessica.norman@local.gov.uk).

## In brief

### Suicides rising

Official statistics show 2018 had the highest suicide rate in 14 years, with the greatest long-term increases in young people aged 10-24 and men aged 45-64. Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Suicide prevention is an absolute priority for local government. A new national focus is also needed on helping everyone stay mentally well throughout their lives, backed up by funding for councils to spend with local partners, to help prevent more serious problems from developing. No new public health funding, or recognition of the vital role of statutory children's and adults' mental health services, in November's Spending Review will make this incredibly challenging in 2021/22."

### Public health

At least 77,000 premature deaths are caused by health inequalities each year, according to a report from the Health Foundation charity. Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "COVID-19 has exposed the stark health inequalities in different parts of the country and the urgent need to level up our communities. This pandemic has proven the value of local knowledge and leaders, supported by regional and national coordination. The Government should use this opportunity to strengthen public health and improve integration across health and care, backed up by necessary funding."

### Homes for older people

Nine in 10 respondents say government must improve housing for older people, in a survey by Later Life Ambitions and the Associated Retirement Community Operators. Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "Providing accessible and adaptable housing for older people needs to be a key part of our national ambition to build new homes. The Government needs to work with councils, developers and housing associations to provide a sustainable funding framework that offers the certainty and clarity to invest in the future development of housing for people with a range of needs, alongside adapting existing housing stock and other home improvements."

## Funding 'barrier to tackling climate change'

Eight in 10 councils surveyed by the LGA have been affected by a climate-related incident in the past five years, such as flooding.

The LGA's Climate Change Survey 2020 assessed what actions councils have already taken to mitigate and/or adapt to climate change, and asked what policy changes would enable them to do this more effectively in the future.

The survey found that nine out of 10 councils have declared a climate emergency and around 80 per cent had set an official target to become carbon neutral, with many working hard to develop policy and action to tackle climate change.

But 96 per cent highlighted that funding was a barrier to tackling climate change, 93 per cent said legislation or regulation were holding them back, and 88 per cent identified lack of workforce capacity as a challenge.

Cllr David Renard, LGA Environment Spokesperson, said: "Councils recognise the urgent need to tackle climate change and are making active changes to benefit the environment. However, national climate change targets are unlikely to be met unless councils are given long-term funding, devolved powers and easier access to complex government funding pots.

"Now is a crucial time for local authorities to be able to act and work hard to tackle climate change. Drawing up and implementing new policy, hiring and training specialist staff, and communicating this messaging to residents all come at a cost, at a time when council finances are already stretched.

"We want to work with the Government and business to establish a national fiscal and policy framework for addressing the climate emergency, supported with long-term funding."

## FE special needs system 'requires shake-up'

**The 'high needs' system for further education is not working and requires a radical shake-up, council and college leaders have said in a new report.**

The report, commissioned by the LGA, the Association of Colleges and Natspec, the membership body for specialist colleges, highlights that the system is overly complicated, resulting in challenges that have a detrimental impact on further education students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

It found that: students' education, health and care plans are not sufficiently up to date; statutory deadlines are being missed; arrangements for the transition from school to further education are delayed, and may not take place at all; administrative burdens on both councils and colleges are

high; and there are too many disputes about placements.

Part of the problem is that there is too little long-term planning of post-16 high needs provision.

The research identified areas of good practice in the 10 local authority areas and 28 providers that were studied, but suggests that a more radical reworking of the whole system is required – including changes to the funding model so that councils can plan provision more effectively for young people within their local area.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said "an overhaul and streamlining of processes are needed to improve the system for local authorities and colleges in order to improve the experience and aspirations of students".



## Fire safety

The LGA has been pressing for new guidance to prioritise fire risk assessments of the most high-priority buildings

**As first was going to press, the Fire Safety Bill was awaiting its final stages in Parliament before being given Royal Assent.**

The Bill forms part of the Government's response to the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, in which 72 people died. It is one of a series of changes to fire safety and building safety more generally, with further primary and secondary legislation to follow.

The LGA has been calling for councils and fire services to be given effective powers and meaningful sanctions to ensure residents are safe – and feel safe – in their homes.

The Fire Safety Bill is a welcome step in the right direction, giving fire services more power to deal with buildings that have dangerous cladding.

Throughout the Bill's progress, the LGA has been lobbying parliamentarians, and its briefing on the Bill was mentioned throughout debates in the Lords before Christmas.

During these debates, we sought to support the Bill's main purpose while highlighting key areas of concern

to councils, in particular around a requirement for duty-holders to review their fire risk assessments of buildings.

The Bill clarifies that cladding systems and fire doors need be included in fire risk assessments that building owners need to conduct; yet there is unlikely to be enough competent and insured assessors to update the fire risk assessments of all buildings that have external wall-cladding systems.

Councils should not be left in a position where they are required to update fire risk assessments but cannot do so because of a shortage of expert resource, the LGA believes. We also want to see the most at-risk buildings assessed first for fire risk.

The new requirements apply to all buildings with two or more flats in them, but most of these will not be high-risk compared to, say, a 20-storey block of flats.

Consequently, Lord Porter of Spalding, the LGA's Fire and Building Safety Spokesman, put forward amendments addressing councils' concerns around these issues at the Bill's Committee Stage.

The amendments received cross-party support and, following further discussions with officials, the Government tabled two amendments as a compromise to Lord Porter's proposals at Report Stage.

These will protect people responsible in law for residential buildings where they are genuinely unable to review their fire risk assessments, and prioritise higher-risk premises for earlier assessments.

Lord Greenhalgh, the minister, committed to ongoing consultation with stakeholders on how the guidance accompanying the Bill will work in practice. The Government has set up a task and finish group to look at this issue in detail, and the LGA is a member.

These amendments, made in the Lords, now need to be considered by the Commons. As **first** was going to press, a date had not been set for that part of the process.

The Fire Safety Bill is an important step in the right direction, but while councils are leading local efforts to support communities through the coronavirus crisis, the risk to residents in buildings with dangerous cladding systems remains.

The Bill needs to be backed up by further effective powers and sanctions, which we have been promised in the forthcoming Building Safety Bill; sufficient funding for councils to carry out the necessary inspections and enforcement activity; and additional support for blameless leaseholders affected by dangerous cladding.



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

**A**s we start a new year with a new national lockdown, councils face many challenges in the coming days and weeks.

With infection rates rising out of control across the country, driven by the new and more transmissible variant of COVID-19, the Government is right to act, albeit a national lockdown will be tough for many.

Councils will continue to step up to support residents – especially those who are more vulnerable – as well as local businesses, schools and colleges.

There are reasons for optimism, though – not least, the approval of a second COVID-19 vaccine, alongside the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine that was approved in December. The first dose of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine was administered to 82-year-old Brian Pinker, in Oxford, on 4 January.

The ongoing rollout of a mass vaccination programme continues to

offer our best hope of an early return to 'normal', and there has been an encouraging and steady start to what will be the largest programme ever undertaken in the UK.

Councils are working closely with their health service colleagues on this unprecedented rollout, to ensure everybody can receive these life-saving vaccines as soon as possible, in line with the priority list.

The LGA continues to emphasise that local knowledge and expertise will be crucial in encouraging everyone from all parts of the community to get vaccinated. Councils' unique relationship with the people they represent means they are well placed to reach out to those in the priority groups and beyond.

We will need to see weekly vaccine rollout figures broken down by region and local authority. This will ensure the fairest possible distribution and help target support at communities and neighbourhoods where take-up is slower, in partnership with the NHS

and others. In the face of exponential growth in transmission of this virus, it is also important that vaccination plans are accelerated.

Driving strong local action amid this latest national lockdown will add further pressure to already overstretched council staff and their budgets.

Extra government funding and financial measures have helped, but the Government must bring forward a further funding package that addresses the remaining pressures councils face in this financial year.

Meanwhile, the end of the EU transition period and the start of the new trade arrangements have added to the already significant pressures councils are facing.

As we continue to support our communities against COVID-19, the LGA has raised with the Government the pressures on key services, such as our regulatory services, as a result of new checks on goods and the support needed for business – for example, new export certificates.



Please email [EUtransition@local.gov.uk](mailto:EUtransition@local.gov.uk) **if there are particular Brexit risks or opportunities you would like to highlight in your local area, and** visit [www.local.gov.uk/topics/european-and-international](http://www.local.gov.uk/topics/european-and-international) **for more information. For our latest updates on the pandemic,** please see [www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus)



## □ Councils are well placed to reach out to those in the vaccination priority groups □

At the same time, these colleagues remain on the frontline of our work on the pandemic, and continue to deliver important statutory services such as food hygiene and trading standards. There are already skills shortages in these professions and councils are reporting severe difficulties in recruiting new staff.

Since the referendum on EU membership in 2016, we have worked consistently with government on the opportunities and risks to councils and local communities of Brexit.

There are opportunities – for example, to reform procurement and state-aid rules to provide better support to local economies, and to design the successor arrangements for EU funds around the needs of local economies and places.

In November's Spending Review, Chancellor Rishi Sunak said funding for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund would ramp up over time to reach an average of £1.5 billion a year. He also announced funding to help local areas prepare for the introduction of the fund, with communities to pilot programmes and new approaches.

However, the capacity challenges mentioned above, with the confluence of multiple pressures on councils generally – and our regulatory services specifically – add up to a tough start to 2021.

It has been an extraordinary year. We have seen the very best of local government demonstrated every day as we protect residents and businesses and keep normal services running as well as possible in each stage of the pandemic.

I am hugely proud to work alongside you all. The country and our communities are lucky to have local leaders and dedicated council staff who continue to go the extra mile to help them through this crisis.

There is, no doubt, a long way left to go and the challenges that lie ahead remain daunting.

The past few days and weeks have yet again proved that the problems posed by this pandemic are unpredictable and can escalate at any moment. But I know, as a local government family, we will continue to face them together.

## Refocusing commercial activity

The pandemic and changes to official guidance are leading some councils to review their commercial investments

Prudent commercial investments can help local authorities create sustainable income streams that can support the running of valuable services.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes to investment guidance by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, many councils are now refocusing their commercial activity.

When doing this, councils need to consider the importance of purpose, governance and risk.

In the LGA's 'Profit with a purpose' guidance (available at [www.local.gov.uk/profit-purpose-delivering-social-value-through-commercial-activity](http://www.local.gov.uk/profit-purpose-delivering-social-value-through-commercial-activity)), we set out how the key purpose of many councils' commercial activity is to achieve social value for the local community.

Over time, projects can evolve. It is important to ensure the purpose defined in the commercial strategy is still relevant and that all activity within the business plan is working to achieve that purpose. The purpose should be to achieve social impacts – for example, place shaping.

Governance is the structure that will support and empower decision-makers, while holding to account the performance of investments against an agreed plan. Build robust governance into every stage of the process – this can be agile, but should be clear in remit, responsibility and accountability.

Regularly review the governance of commercial activities to integrate

best practice and ensure the mechanism is appropriate for the activity. It is important to have clear and structured governance, providing parameters for risk.

There is risk in all commercial activity. Ensure governance is updated to support decision-makers to act according to the council's risk appetite and tolerance.

Piloting innovations, strong contract management, and planned exit strategies are examples of how new approaches can be trialled and risks can be reduced.

Other key considerations when refocusing commercial activity include:

- the role of the councillor – this is important to set the vision, take decisions and hold commercial activities to account
- ensuring commercial projects are still relevant and have appropriate exit strategies built in
- encouraging a culture of innovation, to help councillors and officers approach problems creatively and from a different perspective
- ensuring you have the skills to make appropriate commercial decisions.

After consultation with councillors, the LGA has created two, free, two-hour Zoom masterclasses to support elected members to develop commercial skills: 'Commercial mindset' and 'Commercial leadership and decision-making' – see below.

**i** **Dates are available in January (15 and 22), February (5 and 19) and March (5 and 19).** To find out more and to book your place, please visit [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/commercialisation/free-commercial-skills-councillors](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/commercialisation/free-commercial-skills-councillors)



□ Councils need to consider the importance of purpose, governance and risk □



# The finance settlement 2021

A funding increase for councils will be dependent on them increasing council tax bills

**C**ommunities Secretary Robert Jenrick MP published the 'Provisional local government finance settlement: England, 2021 to 2022' before the Christmas parliamentary recess, alongside separate announcements on COVID-19 funding.

The settlement includes new funding for adult and children's social care, and for councils with responsibility for services such as homelessness, planning, recycling and refuse collection. This will help meet cost and demand pressures in the new financial year.

There is also the potential to increase council core spending power by up to 4.5 per cent in 2021/22 to support vital local services.

However, the LGA has warned that more than 85 per cent of the potential core funding increase is dependent on councils increasing council tax

by up to 5 per cent in 2021/22. This leaves councils facing a tough choice about whether to increase bills to bring in desperately needed funding to protect services when some households are facing significant burdens and challenges.

The ability to bring in extra council tax remains a sticking plaster and not a long-term solution. It falls short of the sustainable long-term funding that is needed to improve the services our communities and local economies will need to recover from the pandemic.

Councils need clarity and certainty about how all local services will be funded over the next few years and beyond. The LGA wants to see a three-year settlement and meaningful progress towards a long-term, sustainable solution to the adult social care funding crisis.

We are also calling for the Government to restart its Fair Funding Review, and for its business rates

review to look at new sources of finance for councils, and different ways of incentivising growth. Business rates account for around a quarter of all council spending power.

The consultation on the provisional settlement closes on 16 January. The LGA will be responding and is urging councils to help shape its submission by sharing their views by emailing [lgfinance@local.gov.uk](mailto:lgfinance@local.gov.uk).

Please also share your views or submissions to the Budget, which will be on 3 March and will set out the next phase of the Government's plan to tackle COVID-19 and protect jobs. The deadline for written Budget representations to the Treasury is 14 January.

**i** The LGA's comprehensive on-the-day briefing on the provisional finance settlement is available at [www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses](http://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses)

## Key funding announcements

### Adult and children's social care

- Additional Social Care Grant of £300 million for adult and children's services.
- Current social care funding to continue in 2021/22.

**LGA view:** "The £300 million sum is not significant in comparison to the cost pressures these services face. It is disappointing that the improved Better Care Fund has been frozen."

### Council tax

- Referendum threshold is 2 per cent, or the higher of either 2 per cent or £5 on a Band D bill for shire districts.
- 3 per cent adult social care precept, can be spread over two years.

**LGA view:** "An increase in council tax of up to 5 per cent will place a significant burden on households. In addition, increasing council tax raises different amounts of money in different parts of the country, unrelated to need. Council tax rises are not a sustainable solution to funding adult social care."

### Public health

- No information about the national total, or individual council allocations, of the public health grant for 2021/22.

**LGA view:** "We call on government to provide councils with clarity on the public health funding available in 2021/22 as a matter of urgency. The current delay to the announcement is making it extremely difficult for councils to plan effectively at a time when public health services are vital to the fight against COVID-19."

## Fair Funding Review

- Government will work with the sector and MPs to seek a new consensus for broader reforms to local government finance, including the Fair Funding Review and the business rates reset.
- Councils will be set on a long-term trajectory of sustainable growth and fair resources.

**LGA view:** “The Government should resume the Fair Funding Review, but with a guarantee that the transitional mechanisms ensure that no councils experience a loss of income.”

## District services

- A new \$111 million ‘lower tier services’ grant – \$86 million for districts and unitaries in line with their shares of the ‘lower-tier’ element of the settlement funding assessment, and \$25 million for districts to ensure no council sees its core spending power reduce in 2021/22.

**LGA view:** “Councils receiving this funding will welcome the additional resource, but full compensation for COVID-19-related costs, including lost income, is required.”

## COVID-19 funding

- \$1.55 billion of unringfenced funding to meet expenditure pressures.
- Continuation of the sales, fees and charges compensation scheme for the first three months of 2021/22, using a quarter of each council’s 2020/21 budgeted income as the baseline from which to assess losses.

**LGA view:** “Council services have been critical in the fight against COVID-19 and it is good that further funding has been provided to manage the cost pressures and income losses they face.”

## New Homes Bonus

- Provisional \$622 million included in councils’ core spending power in 2021/22.
- Government to consult on the future of the scheme, and implement reforms in 2022/23.

**LGA view:** “The Government needs to work closely with councils as part of its review of the New Homes Bonus to ensure it helps us deliver more homes and works for local government.”

## Rural services

- Rural Services Delivery Grant will be \$85 million in 2021/22 – up \$4 million.
- Government is consulting on retaining the current method of distributing the grant.

**LGA view:** “Councils in rural areas will welcome this additional funding and we encourage affected local authorities to respond to the consultation.”

## Audit

- Audits deadline put back to 30 September in 2021 and 2022.
- \$15 million to pay for additional costs arising from new reporting requirements recommended by the Redmond Review and additional audit requirements arising from the new National Audit Office’s code of practice.

**LGA view:** “The change to the audit deadline is something that we called for and is welcome, and we also called for any increases in costs as a result of the review recommendations or changes in audit requirements to be fully funded.”

## Fire and rescue

- Fire and rescue authorities’ council tax precept of up to 2 per cent.
- Increase in fire authorities’ revenue support grant in line with inflation.
- Increase in the compensation grant for under-indexing the business rates multiplier.
- Some authorities to get a share of the \$4 million increase in the Rural Services Delivery Grant.

**LGA view:** “A further inflationary increase for 2021/22 following on from the inflationary increase in 2020/21 is helpful. However, fire and rescue services need to be funded to take account of the full range of risks, demands and cost pressures they face.”

## Business rates

- No new business rates pilots.
- Pilots in areas with ratified devolution deals and the Greater London Authority will continue.
- Business rates multiplier will be frozen.

**LGA view:** “We welcome that local government will be fully compensated for the freezing of the business rates multiplier. However, this decision reduces buoyancy in the business rates system and, without alternative means of funding, council income would reduce in the medium term.”

# Becoming leaders

**D**emocracy, decision-making and good governance are strengthened when councillors reflect the people they seek to serve and represent.

That's why, with a bumper set of local elections due in May, the LGA continues to work with councils to increase the diversity of candidates putting themselves forward, via its Be a Councillor campaign (see **first** 653).

We all need to continue to encourage people from our black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)

communities, LGBTQ+ groups, people with disabilities, women and young people to stand for election, given that councillors remain disproportionately white, male and aged over 60.

But we also need to see more diversity in the leadership of local government, by helping councillors in their existing roles and providing a bridge to more influential and senior positions.

This is a key aim of the LGA's leadership programmes, and particularly of its 'weekender' events for BAME, women and younger

elected members (see right).

We also hear from Cllr Stephen Cooksey, Leader of Mole Valley District Council (see below), who has a hearing disability, about the importance of confidence, and why he has spent 48 years in local government.

**i** To find out more about Be a Councillor, please visit [www.beacouncillor.org.uk](http://www.beacouncillor.org.uk). For the LGA's leadership programmes, go to [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership)



## 'Disability provides insights into council services'



Councillor **Stephen Cooksey** (Lib Dem) is Leader of Mole Valley District Council and a member of Surrey County Council

I have always wanted to play a part in improving life and the environment for the community in which I live, and to give residents a genuine voice in the way communities are governed. Local government has been my way of achieving that.

I was first elected in 1971 and, except for a very short period, have remained a councillor (this is my 48th year).

In May 2019, my party gained an overall majority in Mole Valley and I had no hesitation in taking the opportunity to become council leader, with a mandate to achieve – within the constraints imposed by central government – the radical changes that I, my colleagues and our residents were keen to see.

I have an inherited hearing disability, which has become more severe as I have grown older. For many

years it was an irritation, but not a real problem. Except for a few inevitable misunderstandings – the hidden nature of disability does cause problems – I don't believe it has affected my work as a councillor any more than it did in pursuing my professional career.

The increased number of meetings and discussions, both in person and virtually, that comes with being leader has emphasised the disability. But with help, advice and goodwill, I believe that it has been overcome.

Both councils on which I currently serve have been excellent in providing assistance, and have sought and found innovative developments that have helped greatly. They continue to look for improved systems and consult regularly.

In addition, my wife, who is also a Mole Valley cabinet member, has played an invaluable role in helping me. However, there are inevitable consequences, which can be frustrating – but everyone has some problems to overcome if they are to participate in public life.

It is important that people with disabilities should be encouraged to play a full part in local government.

After all, dealing with a disability can offer an invaluable insight for councils providing services for all members of the public.

Disability shouldn't hold back people with principles, ideas and a desire to serve the public from playing a full part.

I suspect confidence is the greatest deterrent, and councils should seek to build confidence by taking every opportunity to assure potential councillors that dealing with disability needs is high on their agenda. Once confidence is assured, the road to leadership is wide open.

My advice to prospective councillors with disabilities would be to not doubt your own stamina and ability, nor the willingness of councils to understand and assist – there is genuine goodwill to help overcome disability and build confidence.

Councils need to be welcoming, approachable and able to demonstrate a real desire to help aspiring members fulfil their potential, regardless of their disability, and I have always found that to be the case.



## Focus on leadership

The LGA offers seminars and events to help councillors build valuable networks with their peers, including dedicated sessions for women, ethnic minority and younger elected members

The annual black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) 'weekender' Leadership Programme for elected members continues to be one of the longest-running and most successful events in the LGA's calendar.

Established in 2004, the programme offers a unique learning and networking opportunity for councillors from BAME backgrounds who are committed to developing their leadership effectiveness and careers.

Helping councillors in their existing roles and providing a bridge to more senior leadership positions are key aims of all the LGA's leadership programmes. This is particularly important in seeking to ensure a better representation of BAME councillors at more influential and senior levels nationally.

The next BAME weekender takes place from 27-28 February. The two days incorporate 'leading-edge' learning interventions and debates facilitated by excellent speakers with significant experience in the leadership field.

There will be conceptual and practical explorations of the notion of 'leadership' across a range of fronts, but with a particular focus on preparing participants for leading roles in communities and councils.

All of this is contextualised by exploring the challenges and opportunities faced by councillors from BAME backgrounds.

More than 365 councillors have attended BAME weekenders so far, with some going on to become committee chairs, mayors, cabinet members, deputy leaders, leaders and MPs.

There has been significant support and recognition of the impact of the programme from national leaders across the political spectrum, including from Lord Simon Woolley, Director of Operation Black Vote.

**i** To find out more about the BAME weekender (and our other Focus on Leadership events for women, young councillors, and opposition members), please visit [www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/focus-leadership](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/focus-leadership) and/or email [grace.collins@local.gov.uk](mailto:grace.collins@local.gov.uk)

## 'World-class' training



Councillor **Bisi Osundeko** (Lab) was elected to St Helens Borough Council in May 2019 and attended the LGA's 2020 BAME weekender event at Scarman House, Warwick Conferences

**F**rom the moment I first received an email from Grace Collins, LGA Leadership Adviser, to the moment I arrived at Scarman House, it was such a positive experience.

As you enter the reception area of Scarman House, you get the impression that the next couple of days will be serious business. Well done to the LGA for choosing such a fantastic and exquisite venue for their BAME leadership training.

On Friday, we had a reception dinner, where we all had a chance to meet other participants.

The first thing you notice about the councillors is the diversity of our political affiliations. The four major political parties were represented, and we had some Independent councillors as well.

I enjoyed the networking opportunity and I had the chance to pick up some best practice ideas from chatting with other councillors. All the councillors were very friendly, and from every corner of the room you could see people smiling.

The entire atmosphere was filled

with such supportive, positive vibes. I exchanged contacts with most of the participants and I can tell that I have made some good friends for life.

Over the weekend, we took part in a range of sessions, including a presentation on 'What is leadership, what's important in relation to BAME elected members?'; an interactive session, 'Personal leadership, understanding leadership styles and the relevance to you and your context'; a 'question time' panel session with senior councillors; other sessions on 'Politics, power and maintaining your identity in political relationships' and 'Is perception more powerful than reality?'; and then a choice of workshops.

It was high-impact training and very loaded, but don't let it scare you. Sessions were interactive, fun and world-class – equivalent to the quality of training that chief executives receive.

The trainers were fabulous and most of them got many (if not all) of us very emotional: it isn't every day you sit in a training event with fellow councillors pouring out their hearts in such an honest, vulnerable way.

The LGA training beautifully surprised my expectations and I'm determined to use the knowledge and ideas that I gained to improve the quality of my work as a councillor. Hopefully, this will improve the standard of living of our residents in St Helens.



Cllr Osundeko (r) with fellow course participant Cllr Smita Rajesh (Lib Dem, Chelmsford)



Councillor **Tim Swift** MBE (left) and **Rob Wester** CBE are, respectively, Chair and Chief Executive Officer of West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership



# The power of place

Place-based leadership and partnership is key to tackling health inequalities

**T**he power of place is felt in your street, neighbourhood, town and – especially in Yorkshire – your county.

The impact of place is felt in the long shadow it can cast over your whole life, as seen in every report from every one of our directors of public health.

We have used this power to build place-based leadership, where political, managerial, clinical and community leaders can build effective relationships to make a change to the status quo. People die too soon and suffer more disability in too many of our places, and we want to change that.

When the idea of sustainability and transformation partnerships (STPs) was first mooted, we realised two things: that the issues affecting people's lives went well beyond health; and that we had plans to address the issues they faced in every health and wellbeing board in all of our six places – Bradford District and Craven, Calderdale, Harrogate, Kirklees, Leeds, and Wakefield.

What has emerged in West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership (WY&H HCP), built on over four years of working together, is a model that tackles problems faced by real people in our communities by seeing the six local places as the building blocks for action.

All saw quickly that they could own their own plans and amplify their impact by working together on a broader geography.

We have rules that define how we only work together at a West Yorkshire and Harrogate system level where it makes sense to do so – where there are economies of scale, good practice can be shared, and difficult issues can be solved with collective action.

By working collaboratively with the people who live and work locally, we are able to build a picture of the system from a local perspective, taking a place-based approach that seeks to highlight the strengths, capacity and knowledge of all those involved.

We also believe that WY&H HCP belongs to all of its partners. It is theirs to do their bidding, and wherever you work – whatever your role – you are part of the system and the solution.

Supported by our politically led and inclusive partnership board (pictured), and a memorandum of understanding adopted by every partner, our focus is to strengthen joint working to improve health and care for the 2.7 million people living across the area.

A key enabler for place-based working is having a clear framework and set of agreed guiding principles for the scope of work and decision-making at each level of the wider system.

Working alongside communities, the partnership board brings together



the NHS, councils, care providers, health and wellbeing board chairs, Healthwatch, social enterprises, and community and voluntary organisations to give people the best start in life, with support to stay healthy and live longer.

Each is an equal partner – there are no bosses, but there is challenge and mutual support, and accountability. This approach is augmented by provider collaboratives, with real power and authority for collective decision-making.

For those who think this must mean a talking shop where cosy consensus is the order of the day, or a world where providers hold sway, then we would point to potentially contentious decisions being made in the interests of people – not organisations.

This has led to genuine changes in hyper-acute stroke units (the critical care people receive in the first



**Cllr Tim Swift MBE (Lab) is Leader of Calderdale Council and Rob Wester CBE is Chief Executive Officer Lead for West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership.** West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership is an integrated care system (ICS), through which councils and NHS commissioners and care providers plan health and care services, together, for 2.7 million people. Please visit [www.wyhppartnership.co.uk](http://www.wyhppartnership.co.uk) for more information





The partnership board of West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership

*An important part of the board's work is improving the lives of the poorest the fastest*

72 hours), vascular services, assessment and treatment units for people with complex learning disabilities, and specialised child and adolescent mental health services.

It has also led to an adoption of good practice that saves lives and prevents illness, such as WY&H Healthy Hearts and our work on cardiovascular disease.

And when difficult issues arise, we tackle them together.

An important part of the partnership board's work is tackling health inequalities while improving the lives of the poorest the fastest.

COVID-19, with its disproportionate impact on those with the greatest challenges, including black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and colleagues, gives added urgency to this work, and our recent commission on this topic focuses on real action.

The action covers everything from housing and jobs to improved planning, representative leadership and

improvements in mental health services – because that is what people need and everyone who can help is around the table.

Without our partnership, our handling of the pandemic would have been much poorer. Issues such as personal protective equipment supply, testing, shielding and mutual aid have been so much easier with our good rules and good relationships.

Our Economic Recovery Plan is founded partly on the anchor role of health and care – and our third-sector partners have avoided disaster through partners working to ensure they have the resources to operate in local streets, neighbourhoods and places.

Any new legislation around integrated care systems needs to recognise that this combination of system, place and sector (provider) collaboration is a winner. It really is a way to truly harness the power of communities.



## Integrated care systems – consultation

Over the past two years, integrated care systems (ICSs) have been formed across England based on voluntary arrangements.

In an ICS, NHS organisations, in partnership with local councils and others, take collective responsibility for managing resources, delivering NHS care, and improving the health of the population they serve.

By working alongside councils and drawing on the expertise of others – such as local charities and community groups – the NHS says it can help people to live healthier lives for longer, and to stay out of hospital when they do not need to be there.

NHS England (NHSE) and NHS Improvement have been consulting on the future of integrated care systems in England. The consultation – which closed on 8 January – included proposals to put ICSs on a statutory footing, and pledged to “work much more closely with local government and the voluntary sector at place”.

Broadly, the LGA supports NHSE's proposals for greater collaboration within the NHS and between the NHS and local government, to join up planning and delivery of services to improve health outcomes.

We also welcome the strong recognition of local government as a key planning and delivery partner at the centre of ICSs.

We do, however, have some concerns about how the proposals will play out in practice, particularly given the stated preference for ICSs to become statutory NHS bodies, albeit with local government representation on their boards.

We have published a briefing (available at [www.local.gov.uk/integration-and-better-care-fund](http://www.local.gov.uk/integration-and-better-care-fund)) that summarises the key proposals of relevance to local government, and highlights some of the LGA's key messages and concerns.

While the consultation has now closed and the LGA has responded (see [www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses](http://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses)), please do email your council's response to [alyson.morley@local.gov.uk](mailto:alyson.morley@local.gov.uk) to help inform our ongoing discussions with officials on NHS reform.



**Consultations on the proposals in 'Integrated care: next steps to build strong and effective care systems across England' closed on 8 January**, see [www.engage.england.nhs.uk/survey/building-a-strong-integrated-care-system](http://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/survey/building-a-strong-integrated-care-system).



# Maximising social value through a local supply chain

As the Government progresses its ambitious COVID-19 recovery strategy, there is increasing pressure on the public sector to better manage its social value efforts and deliver positive outcomes for the people, communities and economies that need it most

**S**ocial value has climbed up the agenda for councils and public bodies in recent years. What was once a tick-box exercise is now considered a commercial imperative. A key driver for this shift was the introduction of the Social Value Act 2012, which urges public bodies to consider how procured services can improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area that falls within their remit.

While the act has been somewhat successful in its mission to improve how public money is spent, there are still many barriers to consider. As the nation moves through the recovery phase of the pandemic, how can local authorities ensure they are creating a sustainable local supply chain to deliver their services while stimulating much-needed local economic growth?

## Investing in your local supply chain

By making substantive commitments to local spending, local authorities can deliver significantly more value for the public purse by supporting small businesses, creating employment opportunities, promoting social integration or delivering better access to training and education. All of this results in a thriving local economy that can clearly demonstrate sustainable growth.

The social and economic challenges of COVID-19 have only made the need for such outcomes more pertinent. As the country builds back from the crisis, local authorities must look to diversify their supply chains and proactively engage with their local economies to maximise the multiplier effect felt internally.

However, there are several core barriers that face the public sector when engaging with local supply chains. One of these barriers is the dependency on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and voluntary, community



and social enterprises (VCSEs) to meet the relevant eligibility criteria, and to have both the capacity and expertise to compete with larger providers in the procurement process. SMEs and VCSEs also often cite a lack of awareness and poor promotion of contract opportunities as a barrier, as well as a tendency for authorities to 'stick with what they know' by using larger national suppliers.

## A unique solution for local government

Bloom Procurement Services offers a comprehensive solution to these challenges through its fully compliant open-access marketplace. Bloom has a proven track record in empowering the public sector to deliver on its social value goals, build a sustainable supply chain, and deliver measurable impact to local economies. A recently published *Social Value Report* for 2020 revealed that the procurement specialist awarded more than £97m worth of projects to local suppliers and successfully embedded more than £28.2m in social value activity within just 12 months.

Bloom's OJEU-compliant, fully managed procurement service – covering specification development, supplier identification and

onboarding, full-contract management, and lessons learned upon successful delivery of outcomes – is delivered through the innovative NEPRO<sup>3</sup> framework. This one-of-a-kind solution allows buyers to move quickly and at the lowest possible cost, saving local authorities, on average, between 11% and 19% against budget.

For cast-iron assurance, each supplier onboarded goes through a robust and detailed accreditation process to verify their capability to deliver in the chosen category. To date, 88.9% of Bloom's accredited suppliers are of SME status, with 9.19% of VCSE status.

Buyers also have the ability to select local suppliers to bid on contracts for large projects that exceed OJEU limits. Such contracts would typically go out to tender at a national level, where competition from national supply chains often excludes local SMEs and VCSEs. But by engaging with these local suppliers, public sector buyers can use their procurement spend to create a sustainable supply chain, reinvest into local economies and, ultimately, change lives for the better.

**Bloom\***  
\*Opening up procurement\*

# Cheers for peers!

An early years peer review programme has been hailed in an independent evaluation



Cllr **Judith Blake** MBE  
is Chair of the LGA's  
Children and Young  
People Board

**P**eer reviews have long been regarded by the LGA as a proven tool for improvement, so it's particularly rewarding when this assertion is rubber stamped by an independent evaluation.

The Early Years Local Government Programme includes a peer review designed and led by the LGA and the Early Intervention Foundation, in partnership with the Department for Education.

It aims to tackle development gaps in early language and literacy skills at the earliest opportunity, and improve the prospects of disadvantaged young children.

It has proved to be a big hit with the 27 councils that, as of March 2020, have

benefited from the peer review team's knowledge and the programme's ethos of sharing best practice.

An external evaluation of the peer review programme by Ecorys, a research and consulting company, has found that it has been instrumental in helping councils shape priorities and improve services and prospects for children and families.

It found that nearly all (96 per cent) of participating councils had implemented some, most or all of the recommendations received, while the range of expertise in the peer review teams was seen as a major strength of the programme, with the vast majority of councils 'very' or 'somewhat satisfied' with the expertise of the team leader (88 per cent) and of the team members (96 per cent).

Other key findings included:

- 92 per cent of councils said the peer review had contributed 'a lot' or 'somewhat' to raising the profile of the issue among senior leaders, and to developing and implementing an integrated strategy in their council

- 88 per cent of respondents said the process had improved workforce skills and knowledge, and data collection and management 'a lot' or 'somewhat'
- 83 per cent of councils felt that the peer review had contributed 'a lot' or 'somewhat' to implementing a coordinated pathway for service delivery, bringing about systems change and generating better outcomes for children and families.

Peer reviewers were seen as critical friends who brought professional expertise, but also an understanding of the challenging context in which councils operate.

Councils felt the recommended improvements were sustainable thanks to senior leadership buy-in and the systemic change that had taken place, but that additional funding would help build on the achievements of the peer reviews.

All the stakeholders interviewed reported being on track to meet the milestones and make progress towards the outcomes they had originally set.

This highly positive evaluation recognises and validates the strength of the peer review programme's 'for the sector, by the sector' ethos, which councils say has been a catalyst for better integration of services in early years speech, language and communication, and increased senior leadership engagement.

This programme is a sure-fire way to help councils achieve their goal to ensure all children get an excellent early education.

It is a textbook example of successful sector-led improvement, which we hope will continue to be funded by government – particularly at a time when councils are tackling the impact of the pandemic alongside a continuing rise in demand for services for vulnerable families.

**i** The 'Evaluation of the early years local government programme' is available at: [bit.ly/3p74F3f](https://bit.ly/3p74F3f)

*Peer reviewers were seen as critical friends who brought an understanding of the challenging context in which councils operate*



# Helping disadvantaged young people

Councils can make a difference when it comes to helping young people at risk of dropping out of school or work

**L**atest official UK figures put the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) at 757,000.

This figure has changed little over the past three years, with the percentage NEET figure for 16 to 24-year-olds relatively flat since 2017 – showing that the system is not working for all young people. Too many are falling between the gaps and need better support.

A new local approach is needed to tackle complex issues and support young people to effectively transition into education or employment.

In addition, 40 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are NEET, compared with 13 per cent for this age group overall. Councils as corporate parents for these young people have clear responsibilities to support them to achieve good outcomes.

In our recent report, 'Re-thinking youth participation' (see **first** 653), the LGA called for additional powers and resources to enable councils and combined authorities to take a more

strategic approach to coordinating and commissioning provision, and developing appropriate education, employment and training offers.

Many councils are already addressing the issues facing their young people locally.

For example, Derbyshire County Council has developed the 'I-Step up Re-engagement Programme' to address a gap in transition support, and provide wraparound provision for young people identified at risk of becoming NEET at age 16 or 18 (Year 11 and Year 13 at school).

Its analysis highlighted that there is little or no government funding for programmes that re-engage young people in education, training or employment between Year 11 and the start of Year 12.

Derbyshire's programme meets the needs of young people who are in this situation, but also those who are in danger of becoming NEET at the end of Year 11 or 13.

The programme is delivered over a three- to four-week period, with young people required to attend for three days

each week for about five hours per day.

One of its unique features is that it is tailored to the needs of the cohort and individuals attending the course. Tutors help the participants address the wider issues that are impacting on the prospect of them remaining NEET – for example, family, substance misuse, physical/medical conditions, mental health problems, and engaging in anti-social behaviour. The course develops a range of employability skills, with work experience days or an employer challenge.

Since the start of the programme, 83 young people have taken part, with more than three-quarters making positive progress.

Derbyshire County Council estimates that between 2015 and 2018, the I-Step up programme generated £523,804 of social value, with a total investment of around £117,000 – giving a return of \$4.50 for every £1 of investment.

Evidence shows that, in uncertain times, employers take fewer risks on young people with less experience. Young people already find it difficult to uncover, understand and access the broad range of interventions that are available and, as a result, many struggle to access jobs that reflect their interests and capabilities.

This can be particularly challenging for vulnerable young people facing disadvantage, and better careers advice and guidance is needed. Councils and combined authorities have already shown how they can respond rapidly to local needs by forging partnerships, adapting provision and delivering advice and support to young people in need. They now need the power and resources to do more.



*Too many are falling between the gaps and need better support*

**i** Please visit [www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation](http://www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation) to read the LGA's 'Re-thinking youth participation' report in full and for further council case studies





Councillor **Sir Richard Leese**  
CBE (left) is Chair of the LGA's City  
Regions Board and Councillor  
**Kevin Bentley** is Chairman of the  
LGA's People and Places Board



# Learning on your doorstep

Councillors have a vital advocacy role in making their local adult and community education services the best they can be

**C**ouncil-run or commissioned adult and community education (ACE) plays a vital role in supporting residents on their journey to learn skills to enter, return to or progress in work. Alongside the economic benefits, it reduces loneliness and makes people happier, healthier, more confident, capable and resilient – making places smarter and more inclusive.

Put simply, ACE transforms people's lives.

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to grip our communities, it is a more important lifeline than ever before. It is the cornerstone of adult learning.

Without it, many of the 600,000 adults – including some of our hardest to reach, vulnerable or isolated residents – that access it every year would not progress into further learning and work, or be able to cope with what life throws at them.

Delivering a range of informal and formal learning, from entry-level courses to professional qualifications – as well as interview support and confidence-boosting programmes in a range of community settings – ACE gives residents a first, second, third or even fourth chance to access learning.

It works with the grain of other place-based services, including employment, regeneration, education, health, and culture, and adds value to each, as well as connecting with agencies such as Jobcentre Plus and local colleges.

The LGA has put together a

handbook for councillors, which includes a selection of case studies demonstrating the excellent work of local ACE services – but there are hundreds more great examples out there. We know that, because 92 per cent of ACE providers are rated good or outstanding, the best performing in the further education sector. We should be extremely proud of that.

But there are challenges and opportunities ahead for ACE services.

**i** **'Learning for life: the role of adult community education in developing thriving local communities – a handbook for councillors'** is free to download at [www.local.gov.uk/publications](http://www.local.gov.uk/publications)

Over the past decade, as national funding for adult learning halved, councils innovated to source new funding, or faced a reduction in provision or a wind down of the service altogether.

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, national investment in retraining was boosted to enable people to adapt to a rapidly changing economy that is more likely to displace the least qualified.

Today, as unemployment soars, we need all hands to the pump to direct that skills investment to where it is most needed – and that must include local ACE services.

Soon, two White Papers – one on further education and the other on devolution – should provide an opportunity to develop a more coherent, place-based approach to adult skills that connects the entire provider base across a local area.

The LGA's Work Local model provides a framework for how that could happen (see [www.local.gov.uk/work-local](http://www.local.gov.uk/work-local)).

So, it is a significant time for the future of ACE. That's why our handbook is so timely and a must-have for all councillors.

You have a critical leadership role to play in getting to know your service, so why not arrange a walk through your ACE service to see it in action? It is on all of us to support, promote, scrutinise and advocate for ACE, so we can make this service the best it can be.

The LGA's handbook provides some top tips on how you can do that, which we hope you will find useful.



*Adult and community education gives residents a first, second, third or even fourth chance to access learning*

Steps and Derby Walk  
in Miller Park, Preston,  
Lancashire



Parks have been lifelines for residents during the pandemic, but many face an uncertain future because of lost income



Councillor **Gerald Vernon-Jackson** is Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

**T**hroughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our local parks have been lifelines for our local communities.

Whether for exercise, relaxation, socially distanced meetings with loved ones or improving mental wellbeing, they have played an important role in our daily lives.

Come rain or shine, our parks

have been busy throughout, signifying a positive change in our attitude towards being active in the great British weather – a momentum that we, as leaders, must act upon if we are to address the stark inequalities highlighted by the pandemic.

While parks remained open, however, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on council parks services, which have lost most of their ability to generate income from visitor attractions, festivals, events and cafes. Our recently published research, co-funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, found forecast external income losses of between £87,000 and £8.8 million across our six case studies. The loss of in-kind volunteer contributions has also been significant, ranging between £12,000 and £1.56 million.

This comes as a further blow to services that have already borne the brunt of austerity, leading to increased reliance on commercial income, fees and charges.

This presents a challenge to park services and it is going to take time to return to previous levels of income

*Parks provide a cheap and cost-effective way to get people active and boost wellbeing*

generation after COVID-19. However, exciting opportunities exist to enhance our parks and embed them in wider council-led ambitions.

For example, as we invest the Government's £2 billion for cycling and active travel, we must ensure that our parks and green spaces are fully connected to these plans and invested in. When connected up, these spaces can make a powerful contribution to tackling obesity and getting more people active, improving mental wellbeing, reducing our carbon footprint, and rejuvenating places into accessible, attractive places to live, work and play.

Our research shows how councils are working more collaboratively. In Plymouth City Council, for example, the pandemic has unlocked relationships between park services, highways and public health teams, resulting in system change that will be key to future developments.

Walsall's park service is using public health funding to gather and understand the demographics of visitor counter data. The data shows a 40 per cent increase in the use of parks and green spaces, which is significant because up to 40 per cent of Walsall town centre residents do not have access to a garden.

Parks have undoubtedly shown their importance. They provide a cheap and cost-effective way to get people active, reduce obesity and boost mental wellbeing. At the same time, they can act as green corridors for wildlife, refuges for pollinators and sustainable drainage systems, and mitigate the impact of air pollution.

As we look to rebuild after COVID-19, we must ensure that these vital assets are fit for the future.

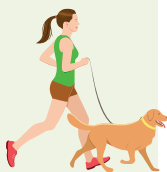
We are calling on the Government to introduce a local, flexible £500 million Green Parks Fund for councils, to invest in small-scale initiatives to help the nation's parks and green spaces recover and flourish – and ensure a healthier, more active nation.

## Park life

- **30 per cent** more people were active during the first national lockdown (Sport England)

- **62 per cent** of the adult population visited a green and natural space in October (Natural England)

- **42 per cent** of adults said visiting green spaces has been more important to their wellbeing since COVID-19 (Natural England)



**i** To find out more about the LGA's research, please visit [www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future](http://www.local.gov.uk/parks-fit-future)





**Julie James** MS is  
Minister for Housing and  
Local Government

## A central-local partnership

**Our communities, families and businesses have been deeply scarred by the impact of coronavirus. Nothing that we can say or do will diminish the hurt that has been felt by so many.**

Coronavirus has been a major test of the whole of government in Wales – local authorities, health boards and the Welsh Government itself, along with our partners in business and the voluntary sector.

We are learning all the time from our experiences and no doubt, with hindsight, we might have chosen to take a different course of action at times.

Nevertheless, we should be confident that we have risen to the challenges and taken full advantage of the relatively small scale of government in Wales.

The Welsh Government has devolved responsibilities for 3.2 million people. It is able to work closely with the 22 principal local authorities, themselves small enough to maintain close engagement with their communities.

The pandemic has strengthened the close working relationship between Welsh Government and local authorities. Making use of digital technology, I have been able to have at least weekly, sometimes daily, contact with all local authority leaders.

Whenever discussions were targeted at a particular topic, I have been accompanied by other ministers, including those with responsibility for health, finance and the economy.

It has been a revelation to witness how technology has allowed so many responsible politicians to interact in such a purposeful way, each from their homes, each supported by their own organisations through digital means.

There is no doubt that trust has developed from the regularity and intensity

of this interaction. This new and developing relationship has worked through a range of hot topics. Together, central and local government have found answers to a succession of urgent questions, including:

- finding the appropriate sources and distribution of protective equipment when demand was surging
- prioritising and maintaining local services while protecting our staff and local communities
- ensuring funds were available to local authorities when their costs were rising and local revenues were falling
- ensuring health boards and local authorities worked together to protect people in their care
- developing local authorities' capacity to deliver local systems for track and trace
- supporting local authorities to support local businesses through the pandemic

- defining the restrictions on social interaction, which allowed us to limit the surges in infection when they occurred.

The above agenda was thrown at us by the events of the past few months. It is to the credit of the close working relationship between central and local government that, in each and every case, we developed our responses together.

Even when we were not as successful as we would have wished, we supported each other without resorting to blame.

The successful relationship between the Welsh and local governments cannot rely entirely, though, on the relationship between government ministers and local authority leaders.

In Wales, 1,200 local councillors work closely with their wards, as well as around 100,000 local authority employees, whose commitment, hard work and innovation we rely on entirely to deliver our priorities.

The challenge now is to ensure that the relationship between ministers and leaders cascades into purposeful involvement and engagement with those councillors and employees.

There is a long way to go, but we have been successful in setting out a direction of travel.

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*✧The pandemic has strengthened the close working relationship between Welsh Government and local authorities✧*

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## Vital council role in rolling out vaccinations



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

**A**fter all that we endured in 2020, I hope that **first** readers managed to enjoy a well-deserved break during Christmas and are feeling refreshed and ready for the challenges that 2021 will no doubt bring.

In December, the nation had an early Christmas present when the regulatory agency approved Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine for use. After this, we enjoyed the historic moment of the UK becoming the first country in the world to begin the mass vaccination process.

Thanks to the Government's forward planning, the UK secured 40 million doses of the vaccine before regulatory approval,

resulting in the most vulnerable people – including care home residents and all those aged over 80 – beginning to be vaccinated in December.

As Leader of Warwickshire County Council, I was delighted that the vaccine was first administered in University Hospital, Coventry. The fact that the second person to be vaccinated was one William Shakespeare, a fellow resident of the county, added to the occasion.

The Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine has also now been approved and is being rolled out. Again, thanks to its forward planning, the Government has secured 100 million doses of this vaccine, which is logistically much easier to distribute.

The development of these vaccines within a year is a huge achievement for humanity, and I am incredibly grateful to the scientists involved and to all those who participated in the clinical trials.

As we continue with the mass

vaccination rollout, I know that councils and councillors will play a vital role in ensuring the success of this collective national effort, as they have done in so many ways throughout the pandemic.

The vaccines, alongside mass testing, will hopefully allow us to get back to some form of normal life by the spring, thus contributing to economic recovery and, eventually, bringing the pandemic to an end.

As we begin 2021, let us take the opportunity to look forward to better times while also remembering the very difficult year we have had and all those who lost their lives during the pandemic.

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**"The development of these vaccines within a year is a huge achievement for humanity"**

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

## The importance of place

**A**s **first** was going to press, the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine was being administered for the first time in the UK.

The roll-out of a second approved vaccine is a cause for hope, in what has otherwise been a bumpy start to 2021, with rising infection rates and hospitals struggling with more COVID-19 patients than in the first wave.

Schools in England, in particular, had a shaky Christmas and New Year ahead of the 4 January decision to move all learning online (except for children of key workers and vulnerable youngsters) as part of a third national lockdown.

We all know that being in school or early years' provision is hugely important for children's life chances, and particularly so for our most vulnerable youngsters.

But parents and teachers who were anxious about the possibility of schools reopening in January will need reassurance

that their schools are safe come February when, hopefully, they might open their gates again to more pupils.

That reassurance can be provided, based on the latest local public health advice and data – if schools have the local flexibility to take their own decisions, in consultation with councils.

While the Government must, of course, set the national direction in respect of the pandemic, it really needs to start listening to councils as they have the on-the-ground knowledge to respond to every aspect of tackling the pandemic

locally – from school re-openings, to support for vulnerable residents and ensuring as many people as possible are vaccinated.

Meanwhile, before Christmas, you will have received our on-the-day briefing on the provisional local government finance settlement for England (see p12).

With the Budget set for 3 March, we will continue to make the case for investment in the council services that will be so crucial in the fight against COVID-19 and to levelling up communities and local economies.





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

## Families hit by council tax bombshell

**H**appy new year to everyone working in local government.

Like most of us, I'm glad to see the back of 2020 and hope that 2021 brings the promise of ending our COVID-19 nightmare.

For many families, though, this year will bring further uncertainty as we respond to the greatest economic shock in 300 years.

Unbelievably, the local government finance settlement shows that the Government's slogan for 2021 will be 'Pay more, get less'.

They're lining up a £2 billion council tax bombshell for hard-pressed families, combined with almost no extra government money for councils.

The council tax hike comes with final confirmation that the Government will not meet its promise to cover all the local costs of COVID-19, forcing cuts in services – while the vast majority of any additional spending power will be funded by local residents, not Whitehall.

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**"The Government will not meet its promise to cover all the local costs of COVID-19, forcing cuts in services"**

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More than 70 councils will see no increase in their funding at all, even after the Government asks them to put council tax bills up by the maximum amount.

Two in five councils had their government funding cut for 2021/22 – despite already being hundreds of millions out of pocket as a result of unfunded COVID-19 expenses and lost income.

Across the country, the pandemic has left local authorities with a £7.4 billion black hole as ministers reneged on promises to stand behind council spending to tackle the virus.

So what does this new year bring? Bigger council tax bills, fewer services, and more uncertainty. Pay more, get less – the Conservatives' plan for 2021.



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

## Turning the tide on the pandemic?

**A**s I write this, I never thought I would be so pleased to see the back of a year as I am 2020.

At the same time, I have never felt so apprehensive about what the next 12 months holds for our families, our communities and the whole of the UK.

We have seen restrictions on who we can spend time with and how we can celebrate the festive season, and many families are facing up to the loss of loved ones and the future without them.

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**"The legacy of the pandemic will be with us for years to come, both the actual disease and its social impact"**

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Some people have been living with such restrictions for many, many months. Some people in care homes have not had a visitor since March 2020!

People have seen their businesses go to the wall. We have seen job losses; many more are in the pipeline and record numbers of families are having to call on food banks.

We have seen a massive outpouring of support for the NHS and keyworkers but, sadly, we haven't seen the same admiration and outpouring of support for others in public service – many of them equally on the frontline as those who work in intensive care.

On the other hand, I have a sense of hope that 2021 will see the tide turn in our fight against COVID-19.

We will see confidence rise as the vaccination programme rolls out, and a partial return to our post-COVID lives.

We need to continue to be vigilant, because the battle is not over.

The legacy of the pandemic will be with us for years to come, both the actual disease and its social impact.

Happy new year!



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

## A packed agenda for the year ahead

**H**appy new year! I hope everyone was able to take a break over the festive period.

Just before Christmas, we had the local government finance settlement. We knew funding for 2021/22 would fall short of what's needed and continue to call for a more sustainable solution.

Despite the progress made, COVID-19 continues to pose challenges, and will for some time. The good news is that vaccinations are flying out the door.

As we look ahead, changes because of Brexit, our COVID-19 recovery, planning, the climate crisis and the local elections will all need our attention, in addition to business as usual.

Our exit from the EU is already being felt, particularly in our port authorities. We must remain vigilant to the impact of other changes, including access to funding and protection of our environmental regulations.

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**"Our members continue to do extraordinary things in support of our communities"**

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The recent decision regarding Heathrow's extension may influence government plans for large building programmes that run counter to reducing our impact on the environment. With air quality contributing to ill health and even death, our standards cannot be lowered.

Despite a U-turn on the distribution of housing required, we still have the Planning White Paper and top-down government reorganisation hanging over us, currently due to return after the elections.

There is much ahead this year, but our members continue to do extraordinary things in support of our communities, and the LGA is here to help.



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

# Councils for fair tax



Councillor **Tom Ross** (Lab) is Executive Member for Finance and Investment at Trafford Council

**Just before lockdown in March, we were due to consider a motion on approving the Councils for Fair Tax Declaration. We wanted Trafford to be an early endorser of a growing movement that is standing up for responsible corporation tax conduct.**

As we reflect on the many consequences emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe there is a growing wish for a fairer society and a desire to avoid going back to how things were before.

So, I'm delighted that the declaration gained unanimous approval at our first full council meeting after opening up to non-emergency business.

We've joined authorities of different

political colours – including Oxford, Oldham, Edinburgh, Peterborough, Lincoln and Greenwich – by committing to lead by example on our own tax conduct, demand greater transparency from our suppliers, and call for more meaningful powers to tackle tax avoidance in procurement.

I was particularly pleased that the motion met with cross-party support from the four political parties represented on Trafford Council.

Polling earlier this year for the Fair Tax Mark, the community benefit society behind the declaration, showed that government and local councils should consider a company's ethics and how they pay their taxes, as well as value for money and quality of service, when undertaking procurement.

We will now be working with our officers, as well as STAR Procurement – the award-winning shared procurement service for Stockport, Trafford and Rochdale Councils – on how we embed these commitments.

Everyone needs to pay their fair share,



especially now, when public spending is under such intense pressure, with the challenges this presents to the maintenance of crucial frontline services.

By signing up to this initiative in Trafford, we are seeking to lead by example.

**i The Councils for Fair Tax Declaration is an initiative of the Fair Tax Mark, which is a not-for-profit community benefit society. Visit [www.fairtaxmark.net/councils](http://www.fairtaxmark.net/councils) to find out more**

# Successfully managing debt in a pandemic



**Matthew Hooper** is Senior Commercial Lead at the Crown Commercial Service

**Talking about debt is never an easy subject to broach, especially during a global pandemic, when debts may be held by the vulnerable or those under significant financial strain.**

Creditor forbearance and support provided to date has helped stave off serious financial difficulties for many, for the time being at least.

But have these actions only postponed the inevitable, leading many to predict a 'debt tsunami' that will peak in late 2021? What is the right balance between fiscal responsibility, to recover legitimate debts, and social responsibility, to protect the vulnerable?

The balance is ensuring that your debt strategy delivers 'fair outcomes' – simply meaning that those who can afford to repay debts do so in a sustainable manner, and those who are struggling or vulnerable, for whatever reason, get the right level of forbearance and support for their circumstances.

To deliver this, you need to understand the circumstances of the parties that owe you debt. The Government Functional Standard on debt states: "Organisations should use relevant sources of data and information to make informed decisions about a debtor's individual circumstances."

Many organisations use internal data to shape collections strategies and some enrich this with data from credit bureaux. But being able to interpret these isn't simple, and is resource intensive.

Through our Debt Management Services (DMS) framework, the Crown Commercial Service has partnered with private sector specialist Qualco, which can compile these data sources together and robustly interpret them to enable an in-depth understanding of customers' circumstances, facilitating maximum engagement, fair outcomes and, therefore, returns.

Add to this mix an experienced resource in the form of fully trained collections agents, regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, who understand customer-specific circumstances and can create affordable solutions, and DMS completes the jigsaw.

With the full range of tools at your discretion, and the appropriate use of these, it is possible to achieve balance – to recover monies owed to you from those who can afford to repay, and to support those who need it.



**i To learn more about how the Crown Commercial Service can support your debt-recovery solutions, please email [info@crowncommercial.gov.uk](mailto:info@crowncommercial.gov.uk) or call 0345 410 2222**





**Lord Bird** MBE  
is Co-Founder of  
The Big Issue and a  
Crossbench Peer

# Commute with a conscience

## The Big Issue eBikes scheme has launched!

Soon you will see the eye-catching red and white design on your streets, and if you rent an eBike, you will be providing job opportunities for the homeless or recently unemployed.

This scheme is about turning around the lives of those down on their luck by providing the right training, free use of the bikes so they can get to their jobs and a tremendous morale boost for all who previously felt they had been thrown onto the scrapheap.

We insist on paying a living wage. We will do all we can to give these people the support to lead a good quality of life as social actions have an echo.

eBikes are an opportunity for consumers to commute with a conscience – a transport version of The Big Issue.

The scheme also aims to improve the environmental credentials of many towns and cities across the UK, encouraging people to cycle, rather than drive.

Why cycling? It's cheaper, often faster, healthier, quieter and is more environmentally friendly than driving or even using public transport.

It is fabulous for endorphins, boosts immune systems and even caters to mental health by providing a healthy mechanism to de-stress (which can't be taken for granted during the chaos that continues to unfold).

The first fleet of Big Issue eBikes is set

to be operational in spring 2021. The hope is to have at least 15 fleets functioning within two years across the UK. But to do this, we're striving for collaboration, with councils, businesses and everyday citizens.

We understand that many councils are unable to fund tenders for cycle schemes. But because our schemes are funded by subscription and advertising revenues, we can drop a fleet into any city regardless of tender while still working with local councils to meet their environmental objectives.



COMMENT

# Designing a dynamic democracy



Councillor **Clive Stevens**  
(Green) is a member of  
Bristol City Council

## The source of our freedoms, our approach to fairness, and the way the economy works is all underpinned by a well-functioning democracy.

Don't believe me? Just imagine how this would all go pear-shaped in a tyranny.

As we take a glimpse into a post-COVID-19 world, we must stop taking our democracy for granted. It wasn't working that well before the virus.

We have Donald Trump to thank for waking us up; often the direction the US takes is where the UK follows.

In my book, 'After the revolution', I

introduce a teaching tool to explain how it is more difficult for a leader to retain power if they need 51 per cent support from the people than a tyrant needing 10 per cent.

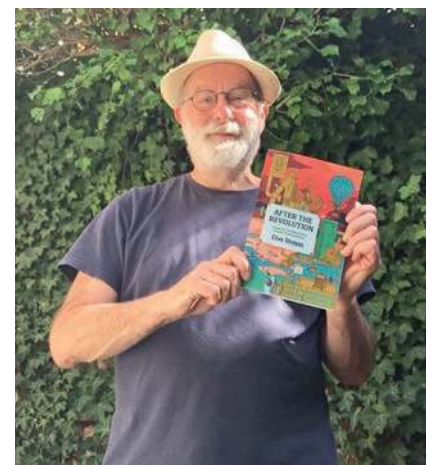
With 51 per cent support, a leader usually needs coalition partners to draw policy, and some scrutiny to ensure issues aren't hidden. This would probably require a proportional representation (PR) system.

Contrast this with a dictator who merely needs the support of 10 per cent or less, to fund the army well, look after the rich and powerful, and stay in power.

If a country is stuck in the middle with a system requiring a leader to get 30 per cent to stay in power, there is a tendency to make sure your own supporters are well looked after and no need for a coalition partner to keep you clean.

Sound familiar? In the UK, a party can get into power with 30 per cent of the electorate.

But PR isn't enough. Voters need to know the facts about complex issues of local or national importance. Citizens' assemblies are a way to do this with



participants paid and the facts and process publicised.

I am especially proud that my council, Bristol, is piloting just this.

As we seek to exit a post-truth, public relations-dominated world, we need a serious look at our democracy and to get in the repair people before it's too late.

If we don't, then local – indeed any – government will be without democracy.

**i** **Clr Clive Stevens is author of 'After the revolution: lessons from local government on designing a dynamic democracy', available from [www.tangentbooks.co.uk](http://www.tangentbooks.co.uk)**



**Anna Cuckow** is  
Programme Manager,  
Local Government  
Support Programme, at  
the Energy Saving Trust



# Working out your electric vehicle strategy

**In November 2020, nearly one in every 10 new cars registered in the UK was pure electric, according to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders.**

Despite the disruption to the automotive sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was a record-breaking year, with more than 144,000 new pure electric or plug-in hybrid vehicles registered up to November, achieving a 9.7 per cent average market share over the year.

Meanwhile, the UK Government will end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2030, and plug-in hybrid vehicle sales by 2035.

As electric vehicles (EVs) become increasingly mainstream, all local authorities should have a strategic grasp of how they will support the transition. However, we understand that this is often easier said than done.

Energy Saving Trust's Local Government Support Programme is funded by the Department for Transport and helps councils make better sense of their EV options. Our advice is free, independent, and tailored to different stages of implementing an EV strategy.

We can deliver informative workshops, review draft EV strategies or planning policies, support business engagement events, map potential charge-point locations, analyse your taxi and private hire fleet, and more.

We're a friendly and supportive team, spread across England, and don't favour one approach or technology over another.

Alongside our strategy advice, Energy Saving Trust administers the £20 million on-street residential charge-point scheme (ORCS) on behalf of the UK Government's Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV).

Local authorities can apply for funding towards the procurement and installation of charge points in residential areas, either on-street or in council-owned car parks.

Access to public charging removes a barrier to EV ownership for households without driveways or garages, who are unable to install their own private home charge point.

It's worth noting that EVs are not just for large cities. We're increasingly working with councils to help them install charge points in villages and towns, as demonstrated by projects in Durham and Kent (see panel).

It's hard to overestimate the value of councillors in championing electric vehicles and charging infrastructure. Successful EV projects need ambitious leadership and a novel combination of council teams and resource investment. Lending your support can open up this possibility and empower officers.

Delivering charging infrastructure sends a strong message that a council is acting on climate change, addressing air pollution, and working to ensure a just transition to electric vehicles.

## Charging points

**Kent County Council** is expanding access to EV charge points in communities where demand is not yet sufficient to attract private sector investment. Around 25 parish and town councils have recently applied to be part of a new project, through which 40 charge points will be installed on community-owned land.

**Durham County Council** has an ambitious vision to ensure all residents without off-street parking can access an EV charge point – ideally within a five-minute walk of their home.

The council has been awarded nearly £500,000 from OLEV through ORCS to install 60 22kW charge points in rural council-owned car parks and in some on-street areas.

Most of the funding is being provided by OLEV, but local communities can assist with fundraising to increase charge-point numbers in their local area and, in return, receive a revenue share.



**For more detail about the support available from the Energy Saving Trust,** please visit [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/business/transport/local-authorities](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/business/transport/local-authorities)





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

# Devolution or divination?



**Devolution, like reorganisation, is a zombie issue – not really alive but not fully dead and refusing to do either properly.**

But, two things are certain. First, whatever comes to English local government will not match devolution to Scotland and Wales and, given the absence of an English Parliament, England will stay short-changed in the devolution stakes.

Second, what we will continue to see is not devolution, but decentralisation.

This is not a semantic point. A range of tasks, functions, responsibilities and budgets have been decentralised to new sub-national structures – combined authorities – but no greater autonomy, freedom or political powers has come with them.

Traditional local government, by contrast, has been almost overlooked in the process; councils have brokered devolution deals but combined authorities have benefited from the flow of central responsibilities.

My research among councillors shows extensive cross-party and independent enthusiasm for a flow of responsibilities and freedoms to local government but frustrations and scepticism about the process and the Government's willingness to devolve to local government.

Councillors criticised the process as:

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✧ *Councillors want to see **major services delivered, organised and run by local government*** ✧

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- top-down controlled by central government
- lacking capacity to negotiate effectively with groups of councils
- requiring councils to guess or second-guess government intentions and decisions
- heavily focused on structure
- having a growth imperative rather than a commitment to genuine all-round devolution
- unsupported across government departments.

Councillors expressed concern that, while responsibilities best run locally are shifted from the centre, the resources and autonomy required to develop those responsibilities to local needs is not forthcoming.

Councillors want to see major public services delivered, organised, overseen and run by local government to make those services more responsive and nimble, and while political differences exist about organisation and delivery mechanisms, that is down to local political choice.

Decentralisation and less central

interference win support from councillors across the spectrum. But there is no settled will about devolution of power and autonomy to local government, the ability to differ from central policy or having the same local legislative powers many international local government systems have where municipalities can pass binding local legislation far more powerful than by-laws.

Around 90 per cent of councillors in England are from the three main parties. So reluctance to grant political autonomy to opponents in other councils or to see local legislation passed by another council with which councillors elsewhere disagree, makes a frustrating sense but also underpins our centralised system.

There is great appetite among councillors for local control and oversight of services and service delivery, but far less for being an autonomous political and governing institution.

The challenge to councillors and central government is to focus on the 'government' in local government and accept that localities should and will do things differently to the centre and each other in organising and delivering services.

Political choice may see different local laws, financing regimes and taxation powers exist across the country – it will drive the centre mad. But that's devolution.



# ELECTIONS



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



## Measuring the strength of local parties

**The Electoral Commission's requirement that local parties are formally registered may have contributed towards their growth, albeit some residents' associations are of long standing.**

This expression of local democracy is regarded by some as essential in mitigating the influence of national party politics. For the same reasons, the survival of Independent councillors is applauded.

There are various ways to measure the extent to which local government is diverse in its party representation. One is called the 'effective number' of parties. This can be applied by referencing either party vote shares at a given election (the notation used is  $N_v$ ) or each party's overall strength in the council chamber ( $N_s$ ).

Any measure of a party system should give more emphasis to larger parties at the expense of smaller ones. Ten parties won through to the House of Commons in 2019, but it would be absurd to say we have a 10-party system since six of them won fewer than 10 seats.

Instead, the calculation for the effective number of parties weights each party's proportion. In respect of the Commons, we get a value of 2.4 'effective' parties.

According to our records of council compositions, the current average value of  $N_s$  across all authorities in England

and Wales is 2.2, very close to that of the Commons. This is unsurprising given our voting system is known to favour two parties.

Of course, this does not mean that councils will necessarily mirror representation in the UK Parliament. Both Cheltenham and Kingston upon Thames have  $N_s$  values of 1.5 but there are no Labour councillors on either council. Liverpool and Gateshead also have a 1.5 party system but neither elects any Conservatives.

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*Conwy can lay claim to be the most diverse council*

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The ebb and flow of support for the Liberal Democrats, the third-largest party in local government, largely explains fluctuations in the value for  $N_s$ . At the turn of the century,  $N_s$  averaged 2.3. But after the party joined David Cameron's 2010 national coalition government and started to lose council seats, the number fell to 1.9.

There are some councils that are consistently higher than the national average. In Wales, where Plaid Cymru has pockets of strength and Independents continue, there are three and occasionally some four-party systems.



Currently, Denbighshire (3.9), Conwy (3.8) and Vale of Glamorgan (3.5) have high values for  $N_s$  and, like many such authorities, are administered by coalitions.

Conwy can lay claim to be the most diverse council. Between 2006-2007, its peak value reached 4.6, with four parties holding council seats alongside 16 Independents.

In England, Redcar and Cleveland currently has the highest value (3.8) and is consistently ranked among the largest party systems. Its 59-member council has significant representation from the three principal parties, but the largest category comprises a range of Independents.

But party systems can be dynamic, and councils may experience changes in complexity. Swale, for example, now ranks among the most diverse party systems (3.5). But for the decade prior to the most recent elections, the effective number of parties had been two or below, when the Conservatives ran the council with either Independents or Labour forming the principal opposition.

That stability ended in 2019 when the Conservatives lost 16 seats, to a combination of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and local Independents.



**For a longer version of this article**, including more on how to calculate the number of effective parties, please visit [www.local.gov.uk/first](http://www.local.gov.uk/first)



## ‘Devolve careers advice for young people’

**T**he LGA's recent call for a youth minister to tackle a 'lost' generation of young people (**first** 653) could not be more timely.

With 16 to 24-year-old unemployment already three times that of overall unemployment (and due to rise further), young people's opportunities and incomes have been decimated by the pandemic.

As a careers adviser for a children's home provider, I am seeing this devastating impact first hand as 16- and 17-year-olds lose their jobs in the hospitality and retail sector – through no fault of their own.

In my ward, we are working hard to combat youth unemployment. Thanks to funding from Erewash Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council, we will be able to deliver accredited first aid and Asdan qualifications to young people in our area as part of our local support package.

Alongside career forums and delivering qualifications, we will also be offering group sessions on soft skills, focusing on the importance of teamwork, communication and empathy in the modern economy.

The Government has introduced positive policies to support youth unemployment, such as the Kickstart Scheme, apprenticeship grants and, crucially, traineeships, which are an important first step for many who are furthest away from the job market.

But to ensure these policies work on a local level, the Government should take on board the LGA's suggestion for careers advice and support to be devolved. A bottom-up, locally led response is the most effective way to tackle the impending job crisis.

**Cllr Paul Maginnis (Con)**,  
Erewash Borough Council

## Supporting our high streets

**I**n October, Lancaster City Council launched its Covid Safe aware scheme, aimed at supporting local businesses and giving shoppers the confidence they need to return to the high street.

To qualify, businesses must produce a comprehensive COVID-19 risk assessment, put in place appropriate controls, train staff so they understand coronavirus control measures, and comply with government and trade guidance to operate safely.

The scheme reached an important milestone before Christmas, notching up its 100th business. While it will never be possible to eliminate risk entirely, the Covid Safe award is a mark that a business has put in place all reasonable measures and controls so that customers and staff feel safeguarded when in the venue.

Local businesses need our support if they are to survive the pandemic. I hope that through this scheme – which has been singled out as an example of good practice by government – we are able to give people the confidence they need to return to the high street and support our district's economy, when the current restrictions are eased.

**Cllr Tim Hamilton-Cox (Green)**,  
Cabinet Member with responsibility for Sustainable Economic Prosperity, Lancaster City Council



**?** If you have a letter or a story from the frontline of council services for our 'People & places' column, please email [karen.thornton@local.gov.uk](mailto:karen.thornton@local.gov.uk). Letters may be edited and published online



# CALLING ALL FUTURE THINKERS



The notanotherapp open parking payment platform delivers a future ready system that empowers you to initiate effective change.

Delivering multi-vendor cashless providers as well as multi-channel analysis of:

- Pay & Display and Pay On Foot data
- Cashless App & Pre-Booking data
- SMS and Carrier Billing data
- Permit data
- Enforcement data

Plus integration with EV charging, kerbside/bay management and travel management systems.

Evolution is happening, will you be a part of it?