

first

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the magazine for local government

Interview:

“Children’s services are causing councils **the biggest headaches because they can’t predict the level of need**”

Andrew Gwynne, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

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Councils’ role in tackling health inequalities



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James Palmer on creating a local skills offer

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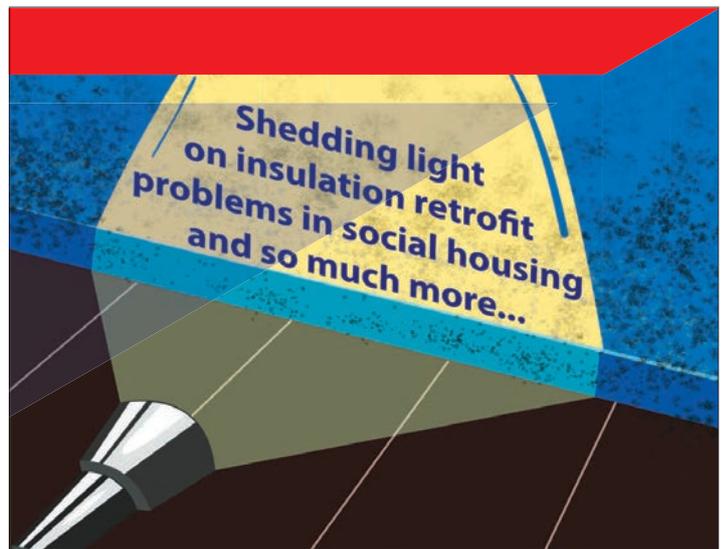
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Future view



Housing is a top priority for councils and the LGA, so it was gratifying to see the Treasury Select Committee endorse our call for all councils to be able to borrow to build more homes (see p5, p24).

LGA support for councils includes its Housing Advisers Programme, which offers specialist support to help you make progress on projects aimed at reducing homelessness or delivering more homes (p16).

Other LGA support featured in this month's **first** includes the national graduate development programme (p13), peer challenge (p14) and our Productivity Experts programme (p15).

Looking ahead, what are the implications for local transport of the development of electric and self-driving cars? We look at the possible benefits for residents (p10).

Our interview this month is with Andrew Gwynne MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who talks about the financial pressures facing councils.

Welsh LGA Leader Cllr Debbie Wilcox discusses the role councils in Wales are playing in promoting economic growth via city and growth deals. And James Palmer, Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, writes about the importance of devolving skills provision so that it can be tailored to suit the needs of local economies.

Lord Porter is Chairman of the LGA

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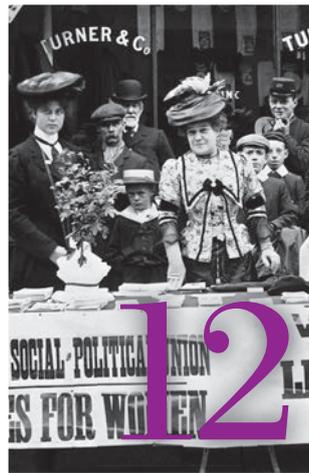
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"If you are spending on children's services and adult social care – the two services that most council tax payers don't see – you're not spending it on the bread-and-butter issues, like the bins"



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Local roads funding 'miles behind'



National roads – motorways and major trunk roads – will receive 52 times more government funding per mile by 2020, compared to local roads maintained by councils.

The LGA is calling for the Government to deal with the disparity in funding, so that councils can tackle the £12 billion repair bill they face to bring our local roads up to scratch.

New LGA analysis shows the Government plans to spend £1.1 million per mile to maintain its strategic road network between 2015 and 2020, but will provide councils with just £21,000 per mile for the local roads they look after.

This is despite an increase in the number of cars travelling on local roads, average speeds falling, and local roads making up 98 per cent of the country's network.

There are now 125 cars per mile on our roads, compared with 101 in 2000. Councils say this is ratcheting up the pressure on local transport, causing congestion and road maintenance issues, such as potholes, wear-down of road markings, and increasing general wear and tear.

Council leaders want the Government to deliver a radical, fully-funded plan for the

growing number of vehicles on the nation's roads. This should include reinvesting two pence per litre of existing fuel duty into local road maintenance, which would generate £1 billion a year for councils to spend on improving roads and filling potholes.

Cllr Martin Tett, the LGA's Transport Spokesman, said: "It is wrong that funding for local roads is miles behind that of the strategic road network. Very few journeys begin and end on a motorway or trunk road. Spending 52 times more on improving our national roads will only serve to speed vehicles up between increased delays and congestion on local roads.

"Councils are fixing a pothole every 19 seconds, despite funding pressures. They want to do more, but are trapped in an endless cycle of patching up our deteriorating network. It would already take £12 billion – and more than a decade – for councils to clear the current local roads repair backlog.

"Only long-term and consistent investment in local road maintenance can allow councils to embark on the widespread improvement of our roads that is desperately needed, to the benefit of motorists and cyclists up and down the country."

Data error on councils' allocations

No council should receive less funding than it was planning for in 2018/19, the LGA has said, after confirmation that figures in the provisional local government finance settlement were wrong.

The errors arose in data used to calculate business rates tariffs and top-ups, supplied by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). The VOA is a government agency that compiles and maintains lists of council tax bands for 24 million domestic properties, as well as lists detailing the rateable value of 1.9 million commercial properties for business rates.

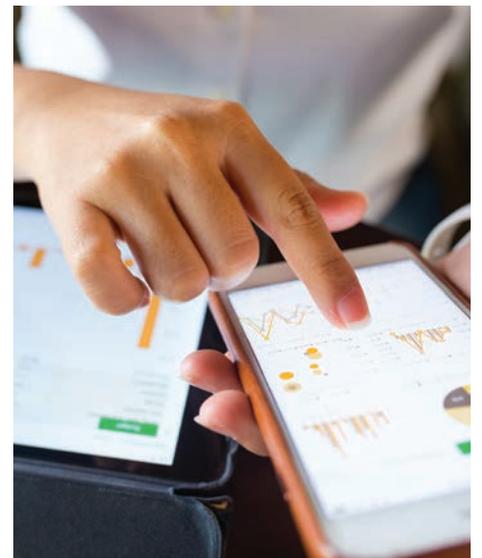
Lord Porter, LGA Chairman, said the error was "hugely unhelpful". He called for urgent clarification of councils' funding allocations and for the final local government finance settlement to be published.

"The Treasury needs to use its central share of business rates to ensure that no council receives less than what they have been planning for in 2018/19, after the allocations published in the provisional settlement (see **first** 619)," said Lord Porter.

"Next year will be hugely challenging for councils as they continue to face unprecedented funding pressures. This unhelpful error by the VOA has added to the challenge facing councils when trying to set a budget for 2018/19.

"Councils now need urgent clarification of their allocations and the final settlement."

He added: "Of course, none of this changes the fact that councils face a £5.8 billion funding gap by 2020, and the Government needs to use the final settlement to provide new funding for all councils over the next few years so they can protect vital local services from further cutbacks."



Call to scrap housing cap

The influential cross-party Treasury Select Committee has backed the LGA's call for the Government to abolish the housing revenue account borrowing cap to boost council house building.

MPs said scrapping the limit on how much councils can borrow to build new homes was vital, and would "unleash" the potential of local authorities to help solve the housing shortage.

In the Autumn Budget, Chancellor Philip Hammond announced plans to raise the borrowing cap for councils in areas of high housing affordability by £1 billion. The LGA has warned that increase did not go far enough, and gave evidence to the committee last November setting out why the cap should be lifted in all local areas.

LGA Chairman Lord Porter said the committee's subsequent backing for the cap to be scrapped was "significant recognition" of the LGA's central argument about the vital role councils must play in tackling the housing crisis.

More than 217,000 new homes were built across the UK last year – well short of the Government's target of 300,000 a year.

Lord Porter said: "Our national housing shortage is one of the most pressing issues we face and, as a nation, we have no chance of housing supply meeting demand unless councils can build again.

"When giving evidence to the committee,



we were clear that if we are to get back to building 300,000 homes a year, then all areas of the country need to be able to borrow to invest so that councils can resume their role as major builders of affordable homes.

"We now urge the Treasury to act on the committee's recommendation and use the upcoming final local government finance settlement to completely scrap the cap on the amount councils can borrow to build.

"It also needs to allow councils to keep 100 per cent of receipts from properties sold through Right to Buy to replace homes and reinvest in new housing."

'Offices to flats' warning

Nearly one in 10 new homes over the last two years was converted from an office and included no affordable housing or supporting investment in infrastructure such as roads, schools and health services.

New LGA analysis found a total of 30,575 housing units in England have been converted from offices to flats without having to go through the planning system since 2015.

It warned this has led to the potential loss of more than 7,500 desperately-needed affordable homes. Councils also warned office space could dry up as a result, leaving businesses and start-ups without any premises in which to base themselves.

Office to residential conversions under permitted development rules accounted for 73 per cent of new homes in Stevenage, 64 per cent in Three Rivers, and 61 per cent in Sutton during 2016/17.

In Nottingham, Basildon, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Hounslow and Harlow the number was more than half.

The LGA said permitted development

rights rules allowing offices to be converted into housing without planning permission should be scrapped to allow councils to ensure homes are affordable and come with the right infrastructure in place.

Cllr Martin Tett, the LGA's Housing Spokesman, said: "At present, permitted development rules allow developers to bypass local influence and convert offices to flats, and to do so without providing affordable homes and local services such as roads and schools.

"Permitted development is detrimental to the ability of local communities to shape the area they live in. Planning is not a barrier to house building, and councils are approving nine in 10 planning applications.

"But it is essential that councils, which are answerable to their residents, have an oversight of local developments to ensure they are good quality and help build prosperous places. The resulting loss of office space can risk hampering local plans to grow economies and attract new businesses and jobs to high streets and town centres."

news in brief

Homes England

A new national housing agency, Homes England, has been launched. It is the successor to the Homes and Communities Agency and will be responsible for building more homes and driving forward changes set out in the Government's Housing White Paper. Cllr Martin Tett, the LGA's Housing Spokesman, said: "For Homes England to be a success, it is crucial that it works positively with local government to deliver the mix of homes, infrastructure and places that people want to see. Every local housing market is different and councils must be able to combine and use Homes England funding flexibly to meet local need and take local opportunities."

Northern transport plan is published

Civic and business leaders have published Transport for the North's draft Strategic Transport Plan. The 30-year plan outlines how transport connections across the North of England need to be transformed by 2050 to drive growth and close the economic gap between the region and the rest of England. The plan could deliver a £100 billion economic boost and 850,000 additional jobs by 2050. John Cridland, Transport for the North Chairman, said: "This is an ambitious programme that will improve our roads and railways, and also drive a sea change in skills development." See www.transportforthenorth.com/stp

Social housing commission

Housing charity Shelter has launched a commission into the future of social housing to address crucial issues highlighted by the Grenfell Tower fire and to give social housing tenants a louder say in the future of social housing. Cllr Martin Tett, the LGA's Housing Spokesman, said councils supported any initiative aimed at improving social housing but needed the financial tools to invest in the quality of their housing stock. He added: "According to the Government's latest English Housing Survey, 81 per cent of social renters were satisfied with their accommodation. Social housing is twice as likely to meet the decent homes standard as the private rented sector."



Increase in victims of modern slavery

Members of the public are the 'first line of defence' in the battle against modern slavery, the LGA has said, amid a 47 per cent rise in victims.

Last July to September, 1,322 victims of modern slavery were directed to the National Referral Mechanism, the UK's framework for supporting victims, compared with 901 over the same period in 2016.

Overall, government figures suggest that there are between 10,000 and 13,000 victims of slavery in the UK.

The LGA has urged people to be on the lookout for tell-tale signs of victims, including: large numbers of people being transported in vans or minibuses; people who seem to have been deprived of food, water, medical care or sleep; or people who are being coached by someone else.

Cllr Simon Blackburn, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: "A simple phone call could make a world of difference to people living wretched lives at the hands of heartless gangmasters. Councils will not tolerate the exploitation of people in their communities and are committed to protecting the most vulnerable in society.

"Modern slavery can be hidden, often in plain sight; on our high streets, in local businesses and even in suburban streets. Our residents may be unwittingly using victims of modern slavery to wash their cars, paint their nails or lay their drives, unaware of the hell they are living through."

The LGA is calling for a "coherent, cross-sector" approach to tackling modern slavery, and is hosting a series of regional events for councils, designed to equip them to be as effective as possible in tackling this issue.

The next event is on 27 February in Bristol (see www.local.gov.uk/events). The LGA and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner have also published advice for councils in 'Tackling modern slavery: a council guide' (see www.local.gov.uk/publications).

New agency to protect consumers

The Government is to create a new Office for Product Safety and Standards, offering specialist services to support enforcement of trading standards laws and manage responses to large-scale product recalls and repairs.

The LGA has been calling for central capacity to support local teams working on product safety, with latest figures showing firefighters are attending three fires a day caused by faulty tumble dryers.

It also wants to see the setting up of a national database of items subject to recall. Consumer safety charity Electrical Safety First reports that 516 products have been recalled since 2007.

Cllr Simon Blackburn, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: "These measures, including setting up a new Office for Product Safety, should go some way towards helping local trading standards teams protect our residents from faulty electrical equipment.

"The LGA has been calling for central capacity to support local teams working on product safety and we're pleased that the

Government has committed to creating this.

"We're also pleased that one of the first tasks for the new Office for Product Safety will be to improve the information available to consumers. The consequences of faulty electrical goods catching fire are devastating, damaging property and, in some cases, causing loss of life.

"That's why councils and fire chiefs have called for a national database of recalled products, so that people can review information about recalls. Moving quickly to create an easily accessible, comprehensive database will be an essential task for the office as it works with trading standards teams in their mission to protect residents.

"Trading standards teams also need adequate funding to make sure they can get faulty appliances off the shelves and out of our residents' homes."

He added: "These measures can only work if the public are aware of them, which is why this database and agency should be backed up by a major publicity campaign to help flag it up to consumers as a trusted one-stop site to check all electrical goods."

Protection for live music venues

Pubs, theatres, music and concert halls will be better protected from unfair noise complaints, thanks to a campaign backed by councils.

The Agent of Change principle, which the Government announced will be included in the National Planning Policy Framework and consulted on in the spring, will ensure a person or business responsible for a change in noise conditions is held responsible for managing that change.

The law currently states that somebody can move next door to a live music venue, for example, and ask for it to be quieter or restricted, regardless of how long the venue has existed or if there is any history of the same noise being a nuisance.

Under the strengthened planning rules, anybody who chooses to move next door to a music venue would be assessed as having made that decision understanding there is going to be some music noise. Equally, a music venue that buys a new public address system would be expected to carry out tests to ensure its noise emissions don't increase.

Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said: "Councils want to protect and maintain the live music venues in their communities, and this much-needed update to the planning rules will help achieve a fair and balanced solution between the obligations of housing developers and protecting our vital grassroots music scene.

"Increasing demand for housing in town and city centres means councils have a duty to help meet this need while also wanting to safeguard what makes our local areas distinctive and attractive – including live performance venues."





'One referral every 49 seconds to child services'

Referrals to local authority children's services are up 4 per cent, with one made every 49 seconds last year, according to LGA analysis.

Overall, there were 646,120 referrals to councils' children's services in the year to March 2017 – the equivalent of 1,770 every day. The figures are up 4 per cent, from 621,470 in 2016.

Section 47 of the 1989 Children Act requires local authorities to investigate any circumstances where they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives or is found in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

Social workers are continuing to work hard to investigate concerns and, if necessary, put in place immediate measures to help keep children safe and out of harm.

But the LGA warned that children's services are facing a £2 billion funding gap by 2020 and are struggling to cope with rising demand for support.

On average, more than 500 child protection investigations were started each

day in 2016/17, compared with 200 a day a decade ago.

Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "The £2 billion funding gap must be addressed in the final local government finance settlement, to ensure the support that families need from council child protection services is there now and in years to come.

"Unless there is an injection of funding to support crucial early intervention, many more vulnerable children remain at risk."

He added: "We will always encourage people to refer any concerns about children to their local authority as soon as possible, so that the situation can be investigated and support or immediate protection put in place where necessary.

"But while these figures are encouraging as a reflection of heightened awareness and identification of child abuse, they also highlight the staggering scale of the pressures that have been building on children's services for a number of years."

Social care inquiry launched

MPs have launched an inquiry into the long-term funding and provision of adult social care, ahead of a government Green Paper expected in the summer.

The Communities and Local Government and Health Select Committees want to identify funding reforms that will command "broad consensus", to allow progress in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the health and care systems.

Cllr Izzi Seccombe, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "The committees are absolutely right to focus on long-term funding solutions and how to build political and public support for them.

"We do not need a major overhaul of our care and support system; the Care Act provided that. What we need is consensus on funding solutions so the Care Act vision can be realised. Long-lasting reforms cannot come soon enough to prevent more care

providers going out of business, contracts being handed back to councils, care workers losing their jobs and less investment in prevention, which is hindering the ability of social care to help mitigate increasing pressures on the NHS.

"An essential foundation for long-term reform is greater awareness among the public of why adult social care matters in its own right. Similarly, progress is only likely if there is cross-party consensus on a way forward. The LGA stands ready to help build that consensus."

But she added: "We must not lose sight of the perilous state of social care funding today. Social care needs to be put on an equal footing with the NHS and government needs to use the upcoming final local government finance settlement to address both the immediate sector pressures and the £2.3 billion funding gap facing social care by 2020."

news in brief

Rotten teeth

New figures show there were nearly 43,000 hospital operations to remove teeth in teenagers and children last year – equating to 170 a day, up a fifth in four years. The LGA said the worrying figures are, in most cases, likely to reflect the excessive consumption of sugary food and drinks, as well as poor oral hygiene. It has long called for the Government to implement measures to reduce people's sugar intake, such as reducing the amount in soft drinks and introducing teaspoon labelling on food packaging. It also wants councils to have a say in deciding where the revenue from the soft drinks levy – due to come into effect from April – is spent.

Child health

The LGA has reiterated its call for proper funding of public health services, after a report from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health found that child health in the UK is falling behind that in other European countries. Cllr Izzi Seccombe, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Evidence shows that intervening in the first 1,000 days of a child's life can make a difference across their lifetime. But councils' public health grant funding being cut by £531 million between 2015/16 and 2019/2020, and councils facing a £2 billion funding gap to children's services by 2020, is making that task harder."

Looked-after boarders

A new Department for Education scheme to give more vulnerable children the chance to attend independent and state boarding schools "provides another option for social workers considering what would work best for individual children and families", the LGA has said. Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "While a boarding school placement will not be right for every child, making this opportunity available for those who would benefit is a positive move. But it is vital that the Government supplements these specific initiatives by providing the additional funding that councils need to ensure that all children can have the bright futures they deserve."

Devolution report

The LGA has warned that areas without devolution deals may be left behind, after the Government's recently published annual devolution report confirmed no new deals were agreed in 2016/17. Cllr Mark Hawthorne, Chairman of the LGA's People and Places Board, said: "The devolution deals announced in the Autumn Budget were a step in the right direction. Taking decisions closer to where people live is key to improving public services and unlocking inclusive growth. We urge the Government to jump-start the devolution debate, by providing further detail on the manifesto commitment to a 'common devolution framework' as soon as possible."

Malnutrition in older people

More than one million older people are at risk of "withering away in their own homes" because of malnutrition caused by social isolation and cuts to public services, according to a report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger. Cllr Izzi Seccombe, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Councils and providers are doing all they can to provide good care and support, including nutritious meals. However, any proposed duty to provide a hot meal every day will lead to increased costs and exacerbate significant current pressures on providers. Our social care system already faces a £2.3 billion funding gap by 2020. Government needs to address this in the forthcoming final local government finance settlement."

Illegal waste

The Government has announced new powers to tackle illegal waste and fly-tipping, including councils being able to apply fixed penalty notices to fly-tippers, as called for by the LGA. Cllr Martin Tett, the LGA's Environment Spokesman, said councils also need a "faster and more effective legal system that means fly-tippers are given hard-hitting fines for more serious offences". He added: "Clearing up fly-tipping costs councils more than £57 million a year – money that could be spent on other services, such as caring for the elderly, protecting children or tackling homelessness."

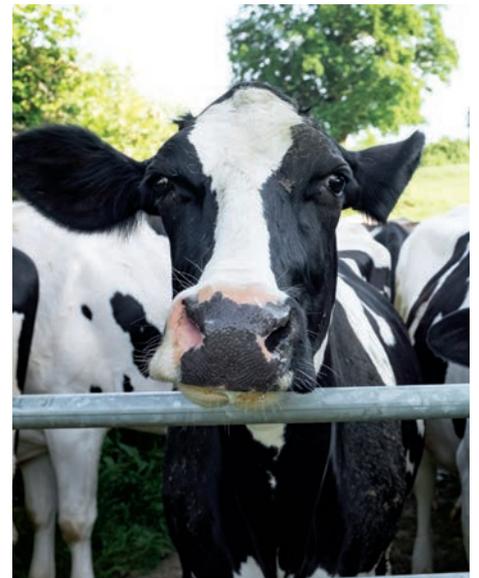
Clarity needed on post-Brexit regional aid funding

The Government is to safeguard subsidies for farmers beyond 2020 – prompting calls from the LGA for a similar commitment to local areas in respect of EU regeneration funding.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove has announced that farmers will receive payment for "public goods", such as providing access to the countryside and planting meadows, after Brexit. Farming subsidies would be guaranteed until the 2022 General Election, with a transitional period to follow in England. But, while ministers have said that local communities will continue to benefit from £8.4 billion of EU regeneration funds until the end of the current programmes in 2020, they have not committed to fully replacing the funding from 2021.

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chairman of the LGA's Brexit Task and Finish Group, said: "The Government is right to be working up plans for how to replace EU funding for farming. But local areas will also need £8.4 billion of EU regional funding replaced after Brexit and the clock is ticking for the Government to similarly set out a firm plan to replace this funding into the next decade and beyond.

"Brexit cannot leave local areas facing huge financial funding uncertainty as a result of lost regional aid funding. This money



has been used by local areas to create jobs, support small and medium enterprises, deliver skills training, invest in critical transport and digital infrastructure and boost inclusive growth across the country.

"To help ensure we have an economy fit for the future, it is essential that this funding to local areas is fully replaced as part of a locally led successor to EU regional aid."

Recyclable packaging 'key to cutting plastics pollution'

The Prime Minister has outlined the Government's 25-year plan to improve the environment, with a strategy designed to reduce landfill, tackle plastic waste and encourage recycling. The measures include: encouraging supermarkets to develop 'plastic-free' aisles in an attempt to increase recyclable packaging; extending the charge for plastic carrier bags to smaller retailers; a consultation on plans for a statutory environmental watchdog; a target to eradicate unnecessary plastic waste by 2042; and a fund to encourage plastic innovation.

Last month, the Environmental Audit Committee called for a 25p charge to be introduced on coffee cups to increase recycling and crack down on the use of unrecyclable materials in cups. The Government announced a consultation on charging a levy on coffee cups and similar materials as part of the measures announced in 'A green future: our 25 year plan to improve the environment'.

The LGA has consistently said that attempts to cut down on waste and encourage recycling must be locally led, as councils understand their areas' recycling needs best.

Cllr Martin Tett, the LGA's Environment Spokesman, said: "Councils have asked repeatedly for manufacturers and retailers, who both choose to produce and stock packaging which isn't easily recyclable, to get around a table with us and work together to explore solutions to this problem. What we need is packaging that is easily recyclable – this would not only make waste disposal easier for our residents, but save considerable amounts of money and energy, while protecting our environment. Producers need to switch to recyclable items so that plastic clogging up our environment becomes a thing of the past."

letters



Help for rough sleepers

Over the past 18 months, a huge amount of work has been taking place to help people who are sleeping rough in Gloucester. The reasons behind each case of homelessness are often complex, so understanding the root causes and circumstances is vital.

Our 'Street Aware' campaign aims to raise public awareness about how best to help people. By encouraging residents to refer rough sleepers to our P3 outreach team through StreetLink, we can link rough sleepers to the accommodation and support available. Getting all people off the streets and into suitable, stable and safe accommodation is the ultimate goal, so we must consider whether giving money directly to individuals is the best way to support them and make a sustainable change.

Partnership work has found that in many cases, individuals on the streets are housed and/or in receipt of benefits, but struggle with addictions that can lead to a chaotic lifestyle and begging. Gloucester City Council has rolled out a successful new service that is dedicated to working with these people that offers safe accommodation and supports their complex needs.

Giving money to people who beg may make life easier for them in the short term, but, in the worst case, could feed dependency. It takes more than money to turn a life around, so we must address this if we are genuine about working together to help people to achieve real change.

Cllr Jennie Watkins (Con), Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods, Gloucester City Council

Exempting care leavers from council tax

Young people leaving the care of Carmarthenshire County Council when they reach adulthood could soon be exempt from paying council tax until their 21st birthday, following a unanimous vote by councillors in favour of such a move.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales recently reported that many care leavers have to survive on as little as £8 a day, with council tax their biggest outgoing cost after rent.

Last year, 77 young people (aged 16 or over) left the care of the county council and began the transition out of care and into adulthood.

Care leavers who were looked after by the local authority are among the most vulnerable groups in our community. As a part of our

sound bites

Cllr Isobel Darby (Con, Chiltern)

"Found time between meetings today for #Vote100. It's only 100 years since all men and SOME women got the vote."

www.twitter.com/CllrDarby

Cllr James Hunt (Con, Bexley)

"Great to see the @LBofBexley Street Cleaning Team out early in #welling this morning - keeping things #clean and #tidy in the best Borough in #London #brilliantbexley."

www.twitter.com/cllrjameshunt

Cllr John Edwards (Lab, Sandwell)

"30-years long service awards @WestMidsFire today for staff with 900-years' experience between them. During their service around 21k people have been brought out of fires or removed from car wrecks. And they all contributed to that. #Brilliant people #Great service."

www.twitter.com/JohnEdwards33

Cllr Carole Williams (Lab, Hackney)

"Sitting in audit committee at the town hall as I receive notification that the international space station is flying overhead. Never fails to be exciting no matter how many times a day it passes!"

www.twitter.com/carolewilliams

Cllr Gareth Kane (Lib Dem, Newcastle)

"The Tories invented PFI, then New Labour used it as their magic money tree (the debts are off the books). Yes, we got lots of shiny new schools and hospitals, but we're really paying for them now #Carillion."

twitter.com/CllrGarethKane

Cllr Karen Walker (Ind, Bath and North East Somerset)

"At the Guildhall tomorrow meeting my Secretary-to-be. Going through the list of events I've been invited to as next year's Chair of BANES. Hope to dedicate a lot of my time to highlighting #WomensRights during my year in office."

twitter.com/Karenwalker3434

corporate parenting role, we believe that the council should aim to keep young people safe and improve their life chances. We have a duty to care leavers.

We believe that we have a responsibility to ensure that, when young people make the transition from care to adult life, the process is as smooth as possible and that we should do all we can to mitigate the changes that often result in care leavers falling into debt as they begin to manage their own finances.

Following the vote, a policy will now be written and brought back to full council to be formally adopted.

Cllr Glynog Davies (Plaid Cymru), Executive Board Member for Education and Children's Services, Carmarthenshire County Council



What do you think? Please submit letters for publication by emailing first@local.gov.uk. Letters may be edited and published online

features

Streets ahead

Are driverless, electric and connected cars the future of transport? If so, what are the potential risks and benefits to the public services that councils provide, and for the residents they serve?

The LGA is looking at emerging trends that have the potential to revolutionise how we move around. We hope to scan the horizon and think about the risks and opportunities for local authorities.

If we are not active in this conversation, we risk technologies focused on the bottom line creating more congestion in cities, while leaving rural areas ever more isolated. However, if we are able to work in partnership with business, manufacturers and regulators, this technology could be harnessed to solve some of the thorniest issues we face.

Widespread adoption of electric vehicles could reduce emissions and clean our air; the roll-out of autonomous vehicles could help isolated individuals, who are excluded from public transport, to access cheap, tailored mobility services; and vehicles that communicate with each other and the roads could have huge safety benefits.

I chaired a seminar for LGA elected members in December, when experts from the automotive and freight sectors, as well as from government, told us how they were influencing technological developments in transport. This raised a variety of issues for councils to think about.

There was discussion about how this technology could exacerbate the existing urban-rural transport divide. The potential for profit in a much denser, more crowded urban market means rural areas could continue to be left behind. But this doesn't have to be the case.

New models of economically sustainable, demand-led, shared transport could connect



Cllr Martin Tett is Chairman of the LGA's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board

new and existing communities with each other, and enable those without cars to access leisure, shopping and vital public services. The LGA will be examining how councils can help foster innovation in this area.

Speakers mentioned the provision of electric charging points – a classic chicken-and-egg situation. Many consumers do not want to make the switch without the charging network being in place. However, without increasing the number of electric vehicles to serve, it is difficult to make a commercial case for the investment our charging network requires.

The Government is providing grants to get the charging industry started and we are seeing encouraging growth in the number of charging points. But we haven't yet arrived at a model that will suit mass adoption of electric cars. How will the National Grid cope with the extra demand? How will we replace the lost fuel duty revenue? What do electric 'petrol' stations look like and where should they go?

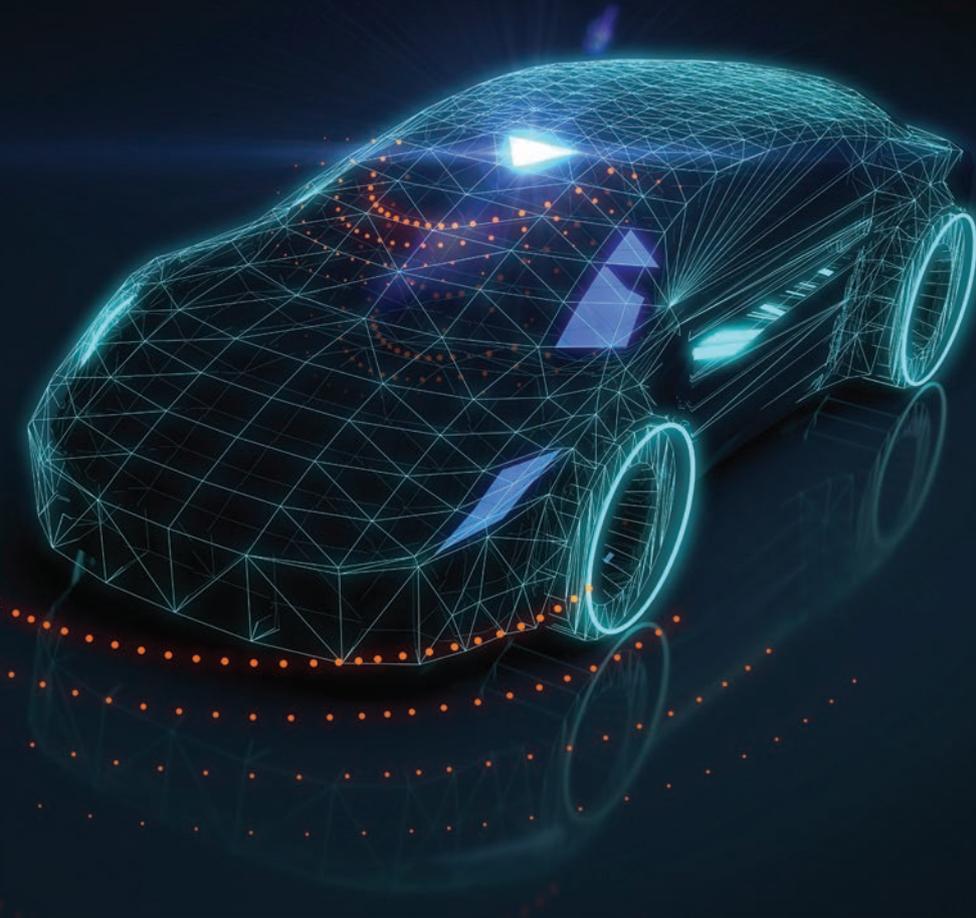
The industry wants designated council officers to discuss the charging needs of an area with private providers. Local authorities can help by making their requirements easy to find on their websites.

The distinction between a taxi and a bus is already being tested by the introduction

of taxi buses with flexible routes, offering on-demand services. The increased flexibility afforded by connected and autonomous vehicles that could be routed and re-routed automatically, in real time, means we will need a regulatory regime that enables, rather than constrains. Councils will be keen to work with providers to examine whether a more flexible approach to public transport could benefit residents.

We also reflected on the risks inherent in the potential changes. Local councils are all too aware of the importance of cyber security, given the number of personal and confidential transactions we deal with daily. This challenge will be hugely increased by automated vehicles, which could be hacked remotely, endangering the lives of people using them and the general public. So, security will play a key part in any changes to our transport system. The connectivity of vehicles is a huge opportunity, but a more connected network is also a more vulnerable one – we need to be ready.

Councils invest in infrastructure for the long term, and investment cycles can last decades – so it is vital that these are future-proofed and able to cope with the demands of changing circumstances. Connected infrastructure that interacts with vehicles



“Widespread adoption of electric vehicles could reduce emissions and clean our air”

will require significant investment. Changes may also be needed in our public realm – what it looks like and its purpose. One of the biggest challenges of this agenda is simply keeping pace with it and ensuring that public investment is not rendered obsolete.

Technology that reduces driving work could also disrupt the jobs market. Currently, logistics and transport account for 1.6 million jobs in the UK. Many of these roles will be driving jobs and, in an autonomous future, they could disappear. While this will reduce transport and freight costs – making the economy as a whole more efficient – we can’t ignore the impact on the individuals who will need to retrain mid-career.

In response to this pressing problem, we need to reconsider the provision of skills and training in our country. Transport automation is yet another reason for the Government to listen to what councils and the LGA have been saying on this issue via our Work Local proposals for a modern, devolved skills system (see www.local.gov.uk/work-local).

In the coming months, we intend to look at three key trends:

- electrification, including how we change the main type of fuel we use to power vehicles
- automation, and whether we will get to a world where no-one needs to drive again
- connectivity – if all vehicles can talk to each other, what will they say?

Whether we arrive at fully autonomous and electrified vehicles by 2040 or 2050, there will be many years of transition during which old and new technologies co-exist.

The transition presents both challenges and opportunities for councils in serving their communities, with issues such as congestion and air quality still needing to be managed. They must be aware of the upcoming changes and engage in discussions about managing future impacts.

To help, we will be producing guidance on the developments we can expect, how innovative local authorities are getting involved in trials, and the issues that all councils will need to address in the future. This is an exciting new area of work for the LGA, and I hope what we contribute will be valuable to our members.



South West – autonomous vehicles

Bristol City Council and South Gloucestershire Council are at the heart of FLOURISH, a project looking to test autonomous vehicles and establish Bristol as a key part of the emerging industry.

FLOURISH is a multi-sector collaboration, helping to advance the successful implementation of connected and autonomous vehicles (CAVs) in the UK by developing services and capabilities that link user needs and system requirements.

The three-year project, worth £5.5 million, is part-funded by the Government’s £100 million Intelligent Mobility Fund, and delivered by Innovate UK, the country’s innovation agency. It seeks to develop products and services that maximise the benefits of CAVs for users and transport authorities.

By adopting a user-centred approach, FLOURISH will achieve a better understanding of consumer demands and expectations, including the implications and challenges of an ageing society. It will also engage with those who need help with day-to-day living needs to develop services.

It will address vulnerabilities in the technology by focusing on the critical areas of cyber security and wireless communications, and model the impact of CAVs on the transport network.

The project will share outcomes, engage with potential customers, communities and consumers, and advertise the Bristol City Region as a hub for the development of CAV technologies.

FLOURISH is expected to bring a wide range of economic and social benefits to the area, including new jobs, and securing intellectual property for local companies (see www.connectingbristol.org/flourish).



If your council is developing good practice in this area, or you want to find out more, please email andrew.jones@local.gov.uk



100 reasons to celebrate

Funding is available to help councils mark the centenary of some women getting the vote

This year marks the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave women aged over 30 the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

The LGA aims to mark the occasion by highlighting the history of the struggle for women's place in politics, and to use the pioneers from the past to inspire the female leaders and politicians of the future.

Women are currently under-represented in local government. In the Census of Local Authority Councillors 2013, the most recent available, around two-thirds (67.3 per cent) of councillors were male and one-third were female. Only 12.3 per cent of local authority leaders in England were women in 2014, compared with 16.6 per cent in 2004.

While this information is outdated – the census will be refreshed this year – it gives cause for concern that councils do not fully reflect the communities they represent.

In recognition of this gap, the LGA's 'Be A Councillor' campaign is developing support aimed specifically at female councillors and candidates. In October 2017, the campaign held a 'women in politics' event in Westminster, London, attended by around 50 delegates, and featuring a cross-party panel of councillors, plus MPs who were previously councillors. Panel members spoke about their own political journeys and motivations, the

challenges they've faced, and the importance of a diverse and representative democracy.

The campaign is working in partnership with organisations such as the youth-led movement My Life My Say, youth news platform Shout Out UK, and the Citizenship Foundation, to help young people gain a better understanding of local politics and to support them to consider becoming a councillor. Some of this work will focus specifically on young women.

The LGA has also been working with the Women's Local Government Society to seek out the pioneers who lobbied and campaigned for votes for women a century ago, and who made an impact in other ways locally. Leaders of local suffrage societies often became the first women councillors, magistrates and mayors, as well as championing a great many other civic societies.

Nominations have been made for pioneers from all walks of life and all corners of the country. They include Catherine Alderton, first Lady Mayor of Colchester and the first female member of Essex County Council, who joined

the Liberal Women's Suffrage Union in 1913 and became its President in 1920. In 1913, she led a pilgrimage of suffrage supporters from all over eastern England to a rally in Hyde Park. She went on to play a significant role as a councillor and also stood for Parliament.

By sharing information about these talented pioneers, we can contribute to a better understanding of the campaign for the vote. But more important is the potential for inspiring others now. Our pioneers programme will ensure the next generation knows about their local heroes. That way, the legacy won't just be the history of winning the vote, but contributing to future equality.

Funding for centenary celebrations

The Government has announced a £5 million Women's Vote Centenary Grant Scheme (see www.womensvotecentenaryfund.co.uk). A small grant scheme for grassroots projects is now open for applications, for grants up to £2,000. A large grant scheme (up to £125,000), for projects encouraging women to participate in public life, will open shortly. Seven 'Centenary Cities' – Bolton, Bristol, Leeds, Leicester, London, Manchester and Nottingham – will host a range of projects to celebrate, as well as remember, those individuals who helped ensure votes for women.



For more information about the suffrage pioneers, visit www.local.gov.uk/topics/culture-tourism-leisure-and-sport/suffrage-citizenship and www.suffrage-pioneers.net
For the LGA's Be A Councillor campaign, please visit www.beacouncillor.co.uk

On the job



Cllr Hazel Simmons MBE (Lab) is Leader of Luton Borough Council

Graduate trainees are helping Luton Council realise its potential – and it's not too late for other councils to join the LGA's programme

An organisation is only as good as its people. It may seem obvious, but it's a principle that cannot be taken for granted. It's also something for which we in local government must plan, if we are to best meet the needs of the communities we serve.

For Luton Council, it's all about securing the best talent to deliver the Luton Investment Framework – our ambitious, but achievable, plan to attract £1.5 billion of inward investment over 20 years and improve the life chances of local people.

We recruited our first national graduate development programme (ngdp) trainees in October 2016, and it quickly became clear the benefits of this scheme flowed both ways. Ask any member of staff who has worked with them and they will agree that our talented national management trainees are already making an impact across the authority.

Securing such high-quality trainees provides an obvious benefit to the council, proving that our offer of genuine development is attractive and spreading the word to other young people.

When they started, our recruits were a little surprised that they would have direct access to the chief executive and myself. But we are keen to give them real responsibility. We make sure they are making a difference – that's what they came into the public sector to do.

We also want to be challenged by our recruits, and have plans to involve them in a reverse coaching scheme. There are gaps in the knowledge of staff of all ages, throughout all organisations. This scheme is about thinking, 'we have a need, who could fill it?'; regardless of age or position within the authority.

"We want to be challenged by our recruits"

These are remarkable people, and we are helping them to realise their own potential and the potential of our authority.

Two of our trainees have started blogs, in which they share their Luton experience with their peers. These are genuine and unadulterated opinions from people who are experiencing our authority first-hand. This is fantastic for our employees, but also for the wider image of the council.

The ngdp's aspiration is to grow the next generation of local government directors and chief executives. We are proud to say Luton has played its part in realising this goal – and received plenty in return.

The national graduate development programme

One of the keys to providing strong public services that improve the lives of our residents is attracting and developing the right people to lead our council teams and organisations.

Over the past 20 years, the LGA has been bringing graduate talent into the sector through its national graduate development programme (ngdp). The programme provides local government with managers and leaders who are ambitious, passionate and committed to improving public services in the best interests of our communities.

The ngdp is highly regarded by councils and graduates, and is ranked in *The Times* Top 100 Graduate Employers and *Guardian* UK 300.

It promotes the benefits of a successful and rewarding career in local government, and has provided consistently high-calibre graduate trainees to more than 160 authorities, through 19 previous cohorts.

This year, the scheme has attracted more applications than ever before, with more than 2,700 graduates applying for trainee positions in local authorities across the country.

There is still time to register as a host authority and to realise the benefits of this national, but flexible, programme within your own council.

Please visit www.local.gov.uk/national-graduate-development-programme/ngdp-information-for-councils for more information, or email the ngdp team at ngdp@local.gov.uk. The deadline for applications is 30 March.



(L to R) NGDP trainees and alumni Laura Wilson, Kirsty Lamour, Alice Lovell and Luke Rigg – all from Haringey Council

Peer challenge

Councils should be exploiting the expertise and support available within local government to help them improve



Cllr Paul Bettison OBE is Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board

The LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge programme continues to be one of local government's resounding success stories.

It enables hundreds of council officers and elected members to spend time in other local authorities – as 'peers' – to provide challenge and share learning. It is a proven tool to support progress, and remains at the

heart of what we call 'sector-led improvement'.

Peer challenge is a tried, tested and trusted scheme. It emerged nearly 20 years ago, as a way for councils to test their effectiveness, assess their performance, and learn from others.

The LGA works with councils to ensure the peer-led approach continues to evolve, keep pace with the changing policy environment, and remain relevant and robust in light of the issues and challenges facing councils today.

In the past six years, 80 per cent of councils have voluntarily commissioned an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge. This suggests they get a lot out of the process.

Of course, I would be expected to say that, as Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board – but you don't have to take my word for it.

Over the past six months, the LGA has been surveying leaders and chief executives to understand the impact of the Corporate Peer Challenge programme.

The feedback speaks volumes:

- 96 per cent said that the programme had a positive impact on their council's performance.
- 96 per cent said it had a positive impact on the delivery of council priorities.
- 72 per cent said it had a positive impact on the financial sustainability of the council.
- 88 per cent said it had a positive impact on the council's external reputation.

An independent evaluation, published in February 2017, also concluded that the Corporate Peer Challenge continues to be highly regarded by councils, delivers a range

“Peer challenge is a useful tool to help achieve improved outcomes for residents”

of positive benefits and impacts, and offers value for money.

The positive impact of peer challenge has, in my opinion, never been clearer.

For councillors of all parties, our priority is delivering the best possible services to our communities. It is clear to me that peer challenge is a useful tool in supporting this and helping achieve improved outcomes for residents.

However, there are still some councils that are missing out on the benefits of peer challenge.

I strongly urge those authorities that have yet to engage with the programme to think hard about the reasons behind this, and to speak to their LGA regional principal adviser (see www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers).

As councillors, we owe it to our residents to encourage our councils to engage in peer challenge regularly and benefit from the learning and support that fellow officers and councillors from across local government can offer.

What is a Corporate Peer Challenge?

- It is a voluntary process commissioned by your council to support improvement and learning.
- It involves a small team of local government officers and elected members, as 'peers', spending time in your council to provide challenge and share learning.
- It takes place at a time of your council's choosing, and focuses on standard elements – such as leadership, governance and finance – as well as on specific areas decided by the council.
- It is fully funded by the LGA on the basis that all councils are entitled to one every four or five years.
- Eighty per cent of councils have commissioned one since 2011.





Productive partnerships

An LGA productivity expert has helped councils in Devon develop an award-winning shared economic strategy



Cllr Paul Diviani (Con)
is Leader of East Devon
District Council

Our focus on collaborative working is already delivering tangible outputs for our local authority areas beyond what could be achieved in isolation. For example, we were able to commission a high-quality business support service with funding from a pooled budget and we established a shared system to manage inward investment data. Additionally,

this collective approach aligns with the national push for joint council working.

Support to develop our strategy was made available through the LGA's Productivity Experts programme, which provides expert support to local authorities to save and generate money. This includes the delivery of economic growth in their local areas.

Our expert was David Howells, Managing Director of Rubicon Regeneration, who worked with the EHOD team to offer clear technical advice and guidance that was instrumental in progressing the strategy and designing a new framework for collaborative economic development across the four local authority areas.

We cannot create jobs and wealth in isolation, but we can create the right environment for businesses to ultimately grow and flourish.

This is the vision of our Exeter and Heart of Devon (EHOD) Shared Economic Strategy 2017-2020, which was recently awarded the accolade of 'Most Innovative Strategy' in a national awards programme run by the Institute of Economic Development.

The economic development teams across the councils of East Devon, Exeter City, Mid Devon and Teignbridge launched our strategy last year, following an already successful collaborative approach stemming back several years.

Each local authority has taken ownership of one of four common economic development priorities: business support and transformation (led by Mid Devon); inward investment (Exeter City); strategic planning (East Devon); and employment and skills (Teignbridge).

The strategy establishes targets around increasing high-quality jobs, attracting and retaining investment and enabling development, as well as improving productivity, skills, qualifications and employability.



The Exeter and Heart of Devon Shared Economic Strategy 2017-2020 can be viewed at, www.local.gov.uk/productivity-experts

Expertise on hand

The Productivity Experts programme supports councils to make savings and/or generate an income against a backdrop of decreasing funding and increasing demand for services.

The LGA grants £7,000 to councils who then commission an LGA-recommended expert to provide direct bespoke advice and support. Over its lifetime, the programme has worked with more than 90 councils, contributing to over £150 million of savings or income generation.

These include Allerdale Borough Council, which was enabled to renegotiate its four largest contracts and realised efficiency savings of £2.3 million against an initial target of £1 million; and Wyre Forest District Council, which implemented systems thinking

across all services to achieve £700,000 of savings in 2012/13. Gloucestershire County Council completed a diagnostic exercise that identified opportunities to secure savings of £10.3 million in the council's adult social care learning disability services.

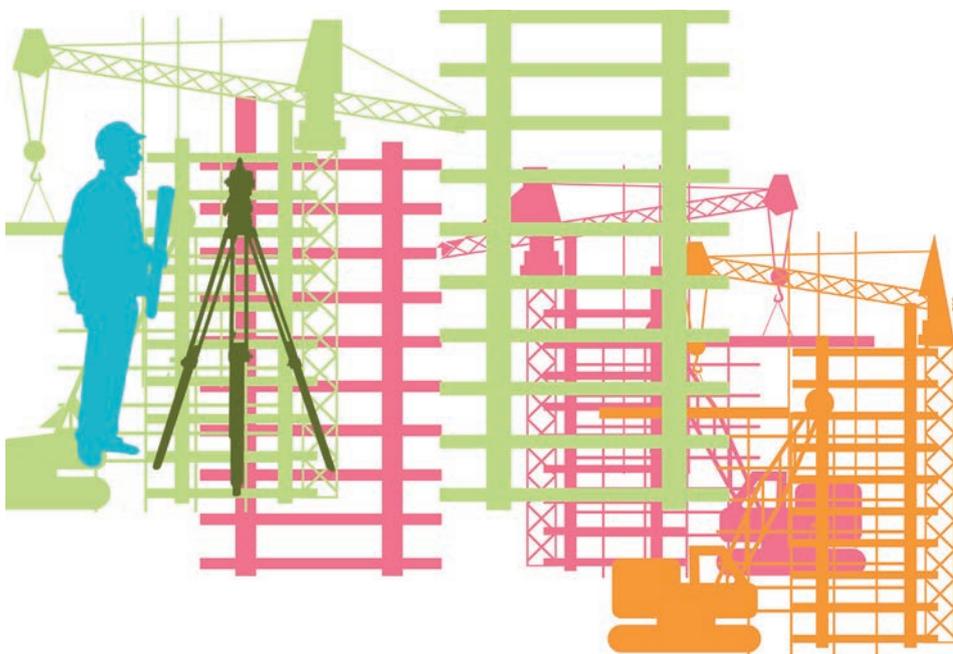
The programme offers a flexible range of support to enable councils to access skills and expertise in their chosen area. All of the recommended experts have a proven ability to work with councils and to deliver results.

Councils can apply at any time during the financial year, and applications should be ambitious with the potential for significant savings or income generation.

For more information, please visit www.local.gov.uk/productivity-experts

Grand designs

The LGA is providing housing advisers to help councils find local solutions to the national crisis



Our housing market is broken, and needs fixing.

Last year, around 90,000 fewer homes were built than we need to meet

our national housing shortage. Every month, councils are housing the equivalent of an extra secondary school's worth of homeless children.

As house builders, landlords, planners, place-shapers, and agents of growth, transport and infrastructure; as guardians to the vulnerable and the homeless; and because they are democratically accountable to communities, councils are at the heart of the solution to our housing crisis. There is impressive innovation in housing emerging across the sector, and the LGA aims to harness this momentum to help councils meet their local housing need.

One of the ways it is doing this is via the Housing Advisers Programme, launched in September 2017. Flexible and locally led, the programme provides an independent

expert for up to 20 days, offering bespoke support to a local authority project to deliver homes, reduce homelessness, or generate savings or revenues.

More than 40 projects at councils across England have been allocated an adviser, and many of these are now under way and beginning to have an impact on their communities (see right).

Cllr Martin Tett, Chairman of the LGA's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, said: "There is no substitute for central government giving local authorities the tools they need to invest in the homes, of all types and tenures, which their communities desperately need.

"However, councils need the best tools available to them to help build on the innovation in the sector. The Housing Advisers Programme is an essential aid to councils wanting expertise to innovate and improve their efforts to help build homes, plan prosperous places and economies, and reduce homelessness."

Case studies

Warwick

Warwick District Council is using its adviser to develop an innovative Student Housing Strategy. The area has a growing student population that is having an impact on the housing market. This project will allow the council to understand expected population projections and establish an appropriate balance between purpose-built accommodation and student houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). This will enable Warwick to manage the impact of student growth on the availability of private rented sector homes for the non-student population, and help the council meet residents' housing needs.

Northumberland

In preparation for the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, Northumberland County Council is working with its adviser to evaluate its current review and referral processes. The adviser will support the development of protocols and a pilot referral system to ensure that it covers all the people who the new homelessness duties apply to, including those considered 'non-priority'. This will be rolled out across the council's Homelessness and Housing Options Service, other council departments, partner agencies and other statutory bodies. The project will strengthen working with institutions such as prisons and hospitals, to ensure that councils are notified in advance of prisoners and patients being released and are best prepared to prevent homelessness.

Test Valley

Test Valley Borough Council's housing adviser is helping unlock a permitted residential development on a former brewery site within Romsey. It has a long and complex planning history dating back to the 1990s, and attempts to build housing have stalled many times. The adviser is exploring the options available to the council to bring forward 200 much-needed homes on the site. It has been found that there is scope for unlocking other permitted residential development sites in neighbouring authorities, with potential to increase the number of new homes being built across authority lines.



To find out more about the [Housing Advisers Programme](#) and follow the progress of all of the projects, please visit www.local.gov.uk/housing-advisers-programme

A matter of justice

Councils have a key role to play in tackling health inequalities in their local areas



Cllr Izzi Seccombe OBE
is Chairman of the LGA's
Community Wellbeing Board

In her first speech after becoming Prime Minister in 2016, Theresa May spoke of the “burning injustice that, if you’re born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others”.

We know that those living in the most deprived communities experience poorer mental health, higher rates of smoking and greater levels of obesity than the more affluent. They spend more years in ill health and die sooner.

Reducing health inequalities is an economic and social challenge, as well as a moral one. Since 2013, local government has been responsible for public health in England and has a specific remit to tackle health inequalities, plus improve the public’s health overall.

Local authorities and their public health teams have been on a journey to understand how we can use councils’ traditional functions in conjunction with our newly acquired public health expertise, to maximise our contribution to closing the unjust health inequalities gap.

Of course, central government has to play its part in reducing poverty and breaking the link between deprivation, ill health and lower life expectancy. But

there is much local government can do, by reducing harm from what we know as the ‘social determinants of health’. These are the factors in people’s lives, such as having a job, friends and a safe place to live, that play the greatest part in determining how long – and with what quality of life – they will live.

When we focus on the social determinants of health, rather than the medical cause of some specific disease, we see that local government services are health services. Almost every council function has an impact on health, including early years’ services, education, housing, employment and welfare, social care, and

“Local government services are health services: almost every council function has an impact on health”

environmental services, including parks and leisure facilities.

For example, children who live close to green spaces have higher levels of physical activity. Those living closer to green spaces tend to live longer than those with no green space. So something as simple as the proximity of people’s homes to a park can make a difference to the length of their lives.

It is no exaggeration to say that, without local government, many adults and children would die sooner, live in worse conditions, lead lives that made them ill more often, and experience less emotional, mental

and physical wellbeing than they do now.

Despite overall gains in life expectancy across all socio-economic groups, however, health inequalities persist – and may even be increasing.

The most significant contribution local government can make is to take a ‘health in all policies’ (HiAP) approach to its core functions and its place-based partnerships. HiAP is a collaborative way of trying to improve the health of all people by systematically and explicitly incorporating health considerations into decision-making.

To ensure that your HiAP approach is aimed at reducing health inequalities – as well as improving the general health of your

population – you need to understand the nature of inequalities in your area, who is affected by them, and in what way.

The LGA has recently published guidance for councillors that focuses on these issues, and helps them develop strategies and action plans to reduce health inequalities in their local areas.

We hope this publication will serve as a useful introduction to the issues, and a vital resource for elected members in their struggle against the unacceptable inequity in health experienced by the most deprived people in our communities.



The LGA publication, ‘A matter of justice: local government’s role in tackling health inequalities’, will shortly be available to download for free at www.local.gov.uk/publications.

‘Narrowing the health inequalities gap’, an annual public health conference and exhibition by the LGA and Association of Directors of Public Health, takes place on 1 March in London.

For information about the programme and to book your place, please visit www.local.gov.uk/events

interview

On the brink

It's not adult social care but pressures on children's services that are now most likely to push councils over a financial cliff edge, warns **Andrew Gwynne MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government**



Local government funding may be “on the brink”, but councils shouldn’t expect any good news in the final finance settlement, due out later this month. So says Andrew Gwynne, Shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who is predicting little will have changed from the provisional local government settlement announced before Christmas (see **first** 619).

The former Tameside councillor identifies a combination of things that have brought local government to a financial precipice – including “the fact that no government since 1991 has bitten the bullet and looked afresh at local government finance”, and a series of “sticking plasters” aimed at trying to alleviate some of the pressures on adult social care.

“Because of those sticking plasters, everybody thought it would be adult social care that pushes councils over that cliff edge. I now suspect it’s more likely to be children’s services,” Mr Gwynne says.

“Speaking to councils, they’re all saying the same thing – that while pressures in social care are still prevalent, it’s children’s services that are causing them the biggest headaches because they can’t predict the level of need.”

The support services that can help divert children from care – such as Sure Start, family support and domestic violence officers – have been “stripped back” as a result of “devastating” funding cuts, leaving children needing specialist help or taking into care, which is expensive, adds Mr Gwynne.

“That then means hard choices need to be made, because if you are spending on children’s services and adult social care – the two services that most council tax payers don’t see – you’re not spending on the bread-and-butter issues that councils are expected to deliver, such as the bins, the parks being maintained, the street lights being switched on and repaired, and all the things that Mrs Smith thinks she pays her council tax for.”

In its General Election manifesto last year, Labour pledged an immediate £1.5 billion for local government, plus £8 billion for adult social care and £0.5 billion for early years. In last November’s Budget, Labour



CHRIS SHARP

“We need to rebuild capacity because the number of specialist officers has been whittled down to the bare minimum”

voted against the cutting of the bank levy by £5 billion, arguing for £2 billion of that to go to children’s services.

“Banks can lobby, children can’t,” says Mr Gwynne, who is worried about the capacity of local government to deliver locally, after eight years of austerity.

“We need to rebuild capacity in local government very quickly, because what we’ve seen is the number of specialist officers – and that historic and corporate knowledge – being whittled down to the bare minimum across all local authorities,” he says.

“It’s all very well us saying we’ve got £0.5 billion for early years [in our manifesto] but – in a lot of councils – Sure Start has been stripped back to the bone or removed altogether, so you’ve got to put that capacity back in.

“Many local education authorities are education authorities in name only, and they don’t have those support officers and networks they once had. We’re going to have to reinvent the wheel – likewise in adult social care, children’s services, and the day-to-day delivery of ordinary services.”

Housing is another area in which Labour’s plans, to build more homes, can only take off if councils have the capacity – in planning departments, enforcement and so on, says Mr Gwynne.

The LGA has long called for the housing borrowing cap to be lifted, to enable councils to resume their historic house building role – something that MPs on the Treasury Select Committee have recently come out in support of, and that Labour backs. Mr Gwynne is keen to see local authorities do more on housing, citing an example from his constituency, Denton and Reddish, in Greater Manchester.

“Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, which is minority Labour-controlled, has very bravely taken on the decision to create a property company,” he says.

“They’re not just building new homes in Stockport for social and affordable rent, they are also using it as a development vehicle to build homes across the whole of Greater Manchester – both for sale and for other housing associations and housing companies.

“That’s bringing an income into the council to allow them to build more homes for Stockport residents to rent through Stockport Homes, the arm’s-length management company. I think that is such a virtuous circle and a great example of Labour in local government making a big difference to people’s lives.”

Mr Gwynne agrees that central government has a lot to learn from local

government when it comes to joining up services locally for the benefit of residents.

“I think we now have to start working more smartly, to make sure the health and wellbeing of the citizen is at the centre of everything that government does,” he says.

“The best in local government have health and wellbeing strategies (HWB) that really direct everything they do.

“Some councils, it’s fair to say, have created HWB strategies because they have to, and they gather dust on the bookshelf. But I’ve seen some really good examples of where the leader of the council is the chair of >



> the HWB board. They then drive the strategy through every level of the council, whether that's planning, environment, leisure, housing, job creation, education and skills, adult social care. Everything the council does determines someone's health and wellbeing."

This smarter, joined-up approach is really paying dividends locally, he says – not least in the combined authorities, with their devolution deals.

Greater Manchester is able to marry up its economic development, skills and transport strategies, and should benefit

from local retention of business rates because its 10 constituent councils have agreed to pool and share their rates.

While Trafford, Manchester and Salford "would be massively advantaged" if they stood alone on business rates, neighbouring Tameside "would need to build another 20 IKEAs just to break even".

"By pooling and sharing, the conurbation breaks even. That then allows the combined authority and the mayor to come up with a really smart economic development strategy, because it means the 10 councils are not all chasing the same pot of gold," says Mr Gwynne.

"They can actually grow the cake together and get a bigger slice of a bigger cake. So rather than all 10 councils chasing after the same business park, you can look at Greater Manchester's strengths and how to develop them economically.

"It might be more development around the old docks at Salford Quays and MediaCityUK. It might be Manchester city centre or the airport. The challenge then is when you get the new jobs in those areas, how do you get the kids from Tameside or

Rochdale or Wigan skilled up to be able to access those jobs?

"Then, with the money that's created from the increase in business rates, how do you get the transport networks and infrastructure in place so the kids who are skilled up to access those jobs can physically get to them as well?

"I think that's where devolution, joint working, and pooling and sharing of resources actually allows local government to be really innovative and really smart. Greater Manchester is quite an exciting place to be at the moment, because we are at the forefront of pushing that agenda."

Mr Gwynne acknowledges that the current system of devolution works well in the metropolitan areas, with their networks of single-tier authorities, but that it's "going to be incredibly difficult to mirror that model" in two-tier areas.

"We're coming to the conclusion that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach [to devolution] – it's what works best, and it's down to local government to say what arrangements work," he says.

"That might be partnerships between neighbouring counties working together with their district councils. It might be a collaboration of unitaries and counties working together within their old historic boundaries, with or without a mayor.

"But what works should be the underlying principle, and let local leaders and local communities decide the best fit for their delivery of services and devolution."

There have been six Shadow Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government since May 2015, and Mr Gwynne is the third to be interviewed by **first**. Does he expect to be in the job any longer than his predecessors?

"I plan to be," he says, with a smile.

"It really is my dream job, and I'm determined not only to be the Shadow Secretary of State, but also the next Labour Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, so that all those exciting things we have talked about – reinvesting in local public services, putting the 'local' back in local government – we're going to get on and do."

Mr Gwynne adds: "I've spent equal amounts of time as a local councillor and as an MP, both for my home town – it is a huge privilege to represent my local community in the town hall and here in Westminster.

"In terms of getting things done, making a real difference to people's lives, making real, physical improvements to my community, most of that happened when I was a councillor – I can still point to those things as I go around my constituency. That's the real frustration of being an MP, particularly an opposition MP – you can't make a difference in the way a councillor can."

“We’re coming to the conclusion that there isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach to devolution – it’s what works best”



CHRIS SHARP

LGA Annual Culture, Tourism and Sport Conference

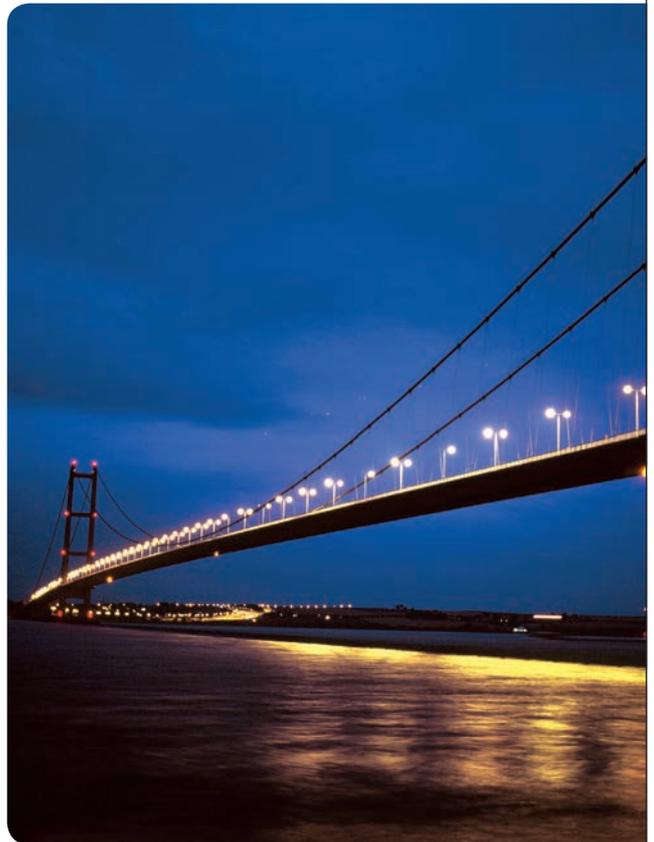
Wednesday 7 – Thursday 8 March 2018, Hull

No one can have missed the enormous success achieved by Hull as UK City of Culture 2017, and we are delighted to take this flagship conference there in March. Delegates will be able to see and hear first-hand about how Hull has used culture to involve nine out of 10 residents in community experiences, attract more than £3.3 billion in investment and achieve the country's fastest reduction in Jobseeker's Allowance claimants.

Newly confirmed speakers:

- **Ros Kerslake OBE**, Chief Executive, Heritage Lottery Fund
- **Rt Hon the Lord Howarth of Newport CBE**
- **Rosie Millard**, Deputy CEO, Creative Industries Federation

To book your place visit: www.local.gov.uk/events



Commercial Skills – Masterclasses for councillors

Councils are increasingly looking at alternative delivery models and innovative ways to generate income, in response to shrinking budgets, rising costs and increasing demand for services. Consequently, working in a commercial environment is becoming increasingly key to the role of the modern councillor.

The LGA is offering free, one-day commercial skills masterclasses for councillors, focusing on key topics including strategy development, business planning, budgeting and finance, risk analysis and management, and your duties as a board member.

The sessions take place on 22 February and 16 March at the University of Warwick, Coventry. To book your place, please email Jamie Osowski on jamie.osowski@local.gov.uk



comment

Local ambition for national growth



Cllr Debbie Wilcox
is Leader of the Welsh LGA

Given the increasing dominance of the regional agenda in economic discussions, the oft quoted maxim that ‘all politics is local’ can perhaps be seen as more pertinent than ever.

It was local Welsh councils that took the initiative to form four ambitious regional economic partnerships. Together, locally elected councillors built these partnerships from the bottom up – and they continue to drive the regional agenda forward by leading on collaboration with central governments, the private sector and other partners, such as further and higher education.

Such collaboration has led to invaluable investment in our regions, through city and growth deals.

The Cardiff Capital City Region, for which I am a cabinet member, has attracted £1.2 billion

worth of investment, with another £1.3 billion package assembled for the neighbouring Swansea Bay City Region.

North Wales has recently submitted projects totalling £1.3 billion and the partnership in rural Mid Wales is working hard to secure similar investment.

However, these important headline figures form only part of our ambition. Aside from representing multi-million pound investments in areas across Wales, city and growth deals will be a catalyst for further, much-needed private sector investment. Indeed, the target for

“If local government is to fully unlock the potential of regional investment, central governments must hold fast to their resolve to take bold and radical decisions”

the Cardiff Capital City Region is to lever an additional £4 billion of private sector investment. One of the first high-profile projects to be supported is seeking to develop the compound semi-conductor industry in the region.

By working together more closely in taking regional collaborative action, we can ensure that the job-making potential of these deals is fully unlocked to spur local economic growth in our communities.

Special social clauses in procurement contracts will lead to invaluable apprenticeships and training opportunities for local residents. Innovative and collaborative approaches to such investment will ensure that we deliver demand-led employment and skills support for industry and infrastructure, which will enable economic growth.

Local government has been working pragmatically on the city and growth deals, both with the UK and Welsh governments. Closely aligning the work of the partnerships with the Welsh Government’s Economic Action Plan will ensure all regional economies contribute coherently and effectively to national economic objectives.

If local government is to fully unlock the potential of regional investment, however, central governments must hold fast to their resolve to take bold and radical decisions.

There is widespread support for a proposed tidal lagoon project, worth £1.3 billion, among councillors and businesses in Swansea Bay – though they await a final decision from Westminster. While not part of the city deal, this catalytic project would complement wider efforts to secure development in the region – and there is potential for similar projects in South East and North Wales.

Once-in-a-lifetime investment opportunities don’t hang around forever; dithering and indecisiveness may be all it takes to sound the death knell for key projects and the transformative social benefits that they would bring.

More and more people, it seems, are waking up to the realisation that local, elected councillors are in the best position to play full and invaluable roles in driving the economy in their respective regions. What’s more, they are fully capable and prepared to step up to the plate.



Public services: outsourcing or in-house?

“Decisions on how to deliver services – and who should deliver them – should be led by elected local councillors”

The catastrophic collapse of Carillion has understandably dominated the headlines recently and caused many sleepless nights for councillors and officers across the country.

As frantic work continues to ensure services continue and jobs are safeguarded, it has also sparked new life into the debate over whether it is appropriate for public services to be run by private companies.

The ideological arguments are well-rehearsed over the years – and elected members of different parties will continue to have sharply opposing views that are unlikely to be reconciled.

But after eight years of harsh austerity, the debate is now on very different ground. Many councils would find it difficult to bring services

back 'in-house', even if they chose to – as they have been forced into serious reductions in the very back office staff that are required to successfully design and run radical, innovative and cost-sensitive services.

Any government that is committed to helping councils run services themselves will need to address the severe funding pressures that have seen councils lose this vital capacity.

It is also important to recognise that many councils – and not just those led by Labour – have few services to bring back in-house anyway, because of conscious decisions not to outsource them in the first place. Indeed, in my own authority, Newcastle, we are proud to run many key services ourselves – and



Cllr Nick Forbes
is Leader of the LGA's
Labour Group

have shown that council-run public services can demonstrate at least the same level of innovation and cost-effectiveness as the private sector claims to offer, and often provide better job security and working conditions.

As localists, we should continue to make the argument that decisions on how to deliver services – and who should deliver them – should be led by elected local councillors. There is no place for legislation or directives from Whitehall that force local decision-makers down a path that they don't believe is the right course of action for their area.

The real test for measuring how much local residents rate their local services rightly remains the ballot box – and long may that continue.

chairman's comment

Tackling the housing crisis



Lord Porter
is Chairman of the LGA

What's in a name? Quite a lot, we hope, when it comes to the renaming of the Department for Communities and Local Government as the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Housing has always been an LGA and local government priority, and Prime Minister Theresa May began the new year by reiterating her commitment to tackling the housing crisis.

Her administration has committed £2 billion to help build a "new generation" of council houses and affordable homes for rent, and in the Autumn Budget the Chancellor announced the lifting of the housing borrowing cap for some councils.

However, the LGA has repeatedly called for all local authorities to be given the freedom to borrow to build the additional affordable homes that will not be delivered by the market. That argument has now received significant recognition from the influential Treasury Select Committee, which has said that the cap should be abolished to "unleash" the potential of local authorities to build new homes.

The borrowing cap restricts the number of homes that councils can deliver. So, if the Government really wants to achieve its ambition of 300,000 new homes a year, it needs to ensure all areas of the country can borrow to invest.

Councils are dealing first-hand with some of the consequences of the housing crisis. We expect homelessness will continue to increase as housing becomes less affordable because of

rising rents and reduced welfare assistance.

It is therefore crucial that government adapts the implementation of welfare reforms to reduce homelessness. This should include lifting the freeze on Local Housing Allowance and relinking it with rents.

Councils are ready and waiting to resume their historic role as major builders of affordable homes. As builders, planning authorities and place shapers, agencies of growth and guardians of the most vulnerable and homeless, they are perfectly placed to lead the way and deliver a renaissance in house building.

We must be at the heart of any housing strategy. And we need government to give us the tools to get building.

“The borrowing cap should be abolished to unleash the potential of local authorities to build new homes”



Cllr David Simmonds CBE is Leader of the LGA's Conservative Group

No 'one-size-fits-all' solution to waste

“Eight out of 10 people are currently happy with the way their council collects rubbish”

Plastic has become a hot topic in recent weeks. The Prime Minister recently launched the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, and the effects of China's ban on imported plastic waste are already being felt.

I believe that the solution to tackling these issues is not, as has been suggested, to standardise waste collections across the country.

Of the many services local authorities provide, waste collection is one of the highest rated. Indeed, LGA polling shows eight out of 10 people are currently happy with the way their council collects rubbish.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to waste collection services. There are vast differences between how waste should be collected from a rural farm to how it should be collected from a block of flats.

Councils are best placed to understand local need, and can do so while working to create a greener Britain.

On another note, I was pleased that Sajid Javid was reappointed as our Secretary of State in the recent government reshuffle, and would like to welcome Rishi Sunak, Heather Wheeler and Dominic Raab to the newly named Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I have already had useful meetings with the ministerial team, and very much look forward to working with them in the coming months.



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

Scrap the borrowing cap to build more homes

“Local government should have the power to direct the use of publicly owned land that is being sold off”

Are the tectonic plates starting to move on council housing?

The cross-party Commons Treasury Select Committee has certainly seen the light and has released a report calling on the housing borrowing cap to be abolished, echoing the long-standing call from the LGA.

And, at our spring conference next month, thanks to a motion that is being tabled by Liberal Democrat councillors, the party will look to reaffirm our pledge to scrap the borrowing cap.

It is by no means the only measure we need to get more socially rented and affordable housing built, but if we are to meet the target of 300,000 homes a year then this can only help.

We are calling for other steps – for example, reform of legislation over empty homes and compulsory purchase orders – so councils have more power to deal with those properties. We're saying that local government should have the power to direct the use of publicly owned land that is being sold off – including that owned by Whitehall departments – for socially rented or affordable housing.

In addition, we will pledge to reform the Right to Buy – giving local councils the option of whether or not to continue with the scheme.

Only time will tell if the Government will listen to the calls for reform – but Liberal Democrats will keep up the pressure for action.



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

Urgent need to tackle plastic pollution

“The Government's deadline for eliminating avoidable plastic waste may be overtaken by councils and private enterprise taking the initiative”

Britain has been shipping our non-recyclable plastics to China. Now China will not, or cannot, take any more.

Although her party was split on the Brexit issues, it seems the Prime Minister tempted voters across by taking on UKIP's policies. So, what will happen if the blue party goes really green, with its 25 Year Environment Plan?

I have been shocked to see plastic bags littering even remote and beautiful African desert areas, and much of our plastic waste seems to end up in the sea, as per David Attenborough's Blue Planet series.

There could be more plastic than fish in the sea by 2050, so the Government's deadline of 2042 to eliminate avoidable plastic waste is not exactly stretching. Indeed, it may well be overtaken by councils and private enterprise taking the initiative.

What is recyclable has been partly governed by what is profitable for our contractors. Some councils have combined their waste stream into a single contract, making it less confusing for residents and, in some cases, cheaper. Others work with businesses on waste minimisation, enhancing their local economy at the same time. There are many good ideas out there.

So, the PM is embracing the EU legislation that will be adopted by the UK. Thanks to our members for their work in developing this legislation and the consequent UK regulations.



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

Inspiring tomorrow's leaders



Cllr Alex Michaels (Lib Dem)
is Chairman of Three Rivers District
Council Youth Council

There's a lot of debate about the state of British democracy and values at the moment.

As Chairman of Three Rivers District Council Youth Council, I've enjoyed seeing first-hand how engaging young people in citizenship and the role of government encourages them to take an interest and play a more active role in society.

Working with primary schools has been particularly rewarding – even from the age of six or seven, it's really easy to draw students into thinking about how they can play a role in society from a young age. They are learning to be involved and influence the world they will live in for decades to come.

Local authorities are a perfect introduction to governance as these are things they can see

within their home environments – from open spaces and refuse, to parking and transport.

We recently had 15 schools in our council chamber debating issues ranging from the challenges elderly people face to controlling parking outside schools (pictured right). We've had great success getting school councils more empowered to take the baton themselves and work to bring change in their local area.

We've also found that it's easier to dabble in more experimental areas of teaching that allow teachers to bring in technology and move away from the high-pressured curriculum focus of more traditional subjects. This has included working with schools to make a community video featuring students talking about how they feel about the future of the local area.

Local authorities have an important and exciting role to play in this and I'd encourage making contact with local schools and starting the journey together. I've found that teachers have been incredibly receptive, and working with primary and secondary students is wonderfully rewarding and challenging. The feedback and views they express are invaluable.



Most importantly, I do feel we are in safe hands for the future, but it is our job as leaders to get out and inspire the leaders of tomorrow.



For more information, please follow Cllr Michaels on Twitter, @MrAlexMichaels



Annual public health conference and exhibition Narrowing the health inequalities gap

London, 1 March 2018

Public health teams and their partners are striving to help people live healthy lives for longer with less dependence on acute health and care services. Councils continue to tackle persistent problems such as mental illness, children's health, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty and loneliness in old age. Join us at our most popular health conference to explore how serious health inequalities that still exist within our local communities are being addressed.

Confirmed speakers:

Steve Brine MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Primary Care

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, ukactive

Lord John Bird MBE, The Big Issue

Alison Garnham, Child Poverty Action Group

To book your place visit www.local.gov.uk/events





Devolving skills



James Palmer (Con)
is Mayor of Cambridgeshire
and Peterborough

Last November, for the first time, all seven regional mayors met in London.

Though there had been many occasions where some of us had been together since our elections, this was the first time we had all been in the same room.

Despite representing often very different areas with different problems, many of the challenges we face as mayors are similar, and there is great value in us coming together as a collective and – when we can – speaking with one voice.

Despite our party political differences, one issue upon which we all agreed was disappointment at the attitude of the Department for Education towards the devolution agenda.

By and large, since my election, support from the Government has been strong and consistent – from the Department for International Trade’s enthusiasm for mayors acting as ambassadors on the world stage to encourage trade and investment, to the Department for Transport’s financial support in the Budget. However, one department where this has not been the case is the Department for Education (DfE).

Along with housing and transport, skills is one of the three key levers that mayors can

pull to help tackle the productivity challenge in their respective areas. Therefore, it is unfortunate that the DfE has not been more enthusiastic about the opportunities that devolution offers to enable us to put together a skills package far superior to the current one on offer.

Though the devolution deals were firm in their support for local skills provision, the experience since the elections has been different. The adult education budget that was meant to be devolved in 2018/19 has been delayed by a year, while the department remains firmly wedded to an overly centralised way of delivering skills.

What’s clear to me is that, as mayor, I have a pretty good understanding of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough economy and the skills requirements of local businesses.

A large amount of my time is spent meeting business people across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough as well as leaders from our further education colleges. Senior business leaders in my area make it clear to me the shortcomings of the system as it stands, and I find it extremely frustrating that, as mayors, we’re not able to do more in this field.

It’s hardly as if the centralised approach is working that well.

Last autumn, Ofsted gave an “inadequate” rating to Learndirect – an organisation responsible for running courses for 70,000 trainees. Meanwhile, after encouraging trends, the number of new apprentices for May-July 2017 was only 43,600, down from 113,000 over the same period in 2016 – a 61 per cent drop – following the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.

As a result, I struggle to see why there isn’t more enthusiasm within the DfE for a more decentralised approach to skills provision. It’s only right that each area has the flexibility to design a skills system that suits the needs of its economy. What works in one area might not be the solution elsewhere. Devolution should be seen as the ideal opportunity to try out a new approach.

Devolution of skills post-16 is not the only way in which we can improve skills provision in this country; much also needs to be done to reform the ways schools are assessed and more balanced careers advice given from an early age.

However, a shift in attitude within the DfE – one which would lead the department to viewing devolution as an opportunity and not a threat to established power bases – would be most welcome.

“It’s only right that each area has the flexibility to design a skills system that suits the needs of their economy”

Know your patch

Have you ever wondered what proportion of your residents are employed or how many local schoolchildren are obese? How does that compare to other places?

LG Inform gives you and your council easy access to up-to-date published data about your local area and the performance of your council and fire and rescue service.

Whether you're interested in scrutiny, a particular service area, or simply need an overview, it can help you review and compare performance with other authorities and assess whether your council is meeting your residents' needs.



In addition, we now offer **LG Inform Plus** to complement LG Inform. This subscription service gives users the power to drill down from authority wide information to much smaller areas.

The service offers more detailed performance and contextual data helping you to make the right decisions about the services you provide to your residents. It provides direct support, online tools and a data feed to use in your corporate systems and external apps.

www.local.gov.uk/lginformplus

parliament

Brexit debates

Since last autumn, the EU (Withdrawal) Bill has been dominating parliamentary time and debates. What form our relationship takes with the EU once we leave will have a significant impact on our communities and the way that local government works for them.

With key issues that affect local government still being decided upon, the work the LGA has undertaken recently in Parliament has been extremely important. We have been lobbying for the replacement of £8.4 billion of EU regional growth and other funding; pushing for a UK alternative to the Committee of Regions, so that local government retains a say on legislative changes affecting it; and looking at some of the thousands of EU laws that affect local government that will need to be adopted or amended.

In Parliament, we have been raising councils' concerns and aspirations for the UK, post-Brexit. We have briefed MPs ahead of parliamentary debates either

side of Christmas, given evidence to parliamentary committees, and worked with parliamentarians to table questions.

Among the latter, our Chairman, Lord Porter, has asked what progress has been made in securing a formal advisory role for councils in UK law-making to replace the one they currently have in respect of EU law-making through the Committee of the Regions.

This issue was addressed by parliamentarians during the EU (Withdrawal) Bill debate, with Chris Leslie MP (Lab, Nottingham East) noting how "many local authorities value the voice that they have through that committee into the policy-making process at European level".

"The question they are asking is: will they still have those same consultative rights when those areas of policy are brought back into a UK context? It is a fair question and I hope that the LGA's points will be addressed," he added.

The LGA and local government associations in Wales, Scotland and Northern

Ireland continue to discuss how these rights and responsibilities can be transferred into UK law.

As reported in last month's **first** 619, the Government has confirmed that EU regional and regeneration funding – worth £8.4 billion to local communities in the UK – will continue until the end of the current programme in 2020. The LGA is now focusing on what happens from 2021, and the development of a UK replacement scheme for EU funding.

In evidence to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, Melanie Dawes, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, said the replacement for the EU Structural Fund presented opportunities to streamline the process and make it more community led.

She also highlighted the potential for growth in local areas from the Government's Industrial Strategy in a post-Brexit landscape. And she discussed issues around the health and social care workforce, and areas of legislation that come from other departments that affect local government and originate in the EU.

CLr Kevin Bentley, Chairman of the LGA's Brexit Task and Finish Group, gave evidence to the same committee, and spoke about the need for the Government to develop a fully funded and locally driven successor scheme to the EU Regional Growth Fund.

He told MPs: "More clarity is urgently needed. The very nature of local government means we are very close to the residents we serve, so this is about people, their jobs, their family, and it is hugely important."

As **first** was going to press, the EU (Withdrawal) Bill was due to have its Second Reading in the Lords, where we will work with parliamentarians and the Government to ensure that the challenges and opportunities for local government are taken into consideration as the Bill is debated and agreed.



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

councillor

Watching the pennies



As a councillor, it is imperative that you operate good financial stewardship principles, to ensure your council spends its money wisely.

Being a good financial scrutineer does not require you to be a financial expert, but it does mean asking pertinent questions, robustly challenging the council's spending plans, and ensuring there are sufficient financial resources to fund its current and future plans.

Given the need for councils to monitor and account for their expenditure, it is becoming increasingly important for elected members to understand how their council uses the money it receives from the many stakeholders who have a vested interest in its financial affairs. These include central government, partner agencies and local public auditors, as well as the various communities they serve.

The sums of money involved in local authority finance can be sizeable, and the task of monitoring and accounting can be

one of the most challenging elements of the wider oversight function of a councillor. However, good financial scrutiny does not require a detailed understanding of columns of figures so much as a willingness to seek clarity on the information that is available within the council, from either cabinet members or officers.

This work can involve:

- challenging how the budget has been put together before it is agreed – and before the level of council tax has been set
- looking at the assumptions that lie behind the executive's budget strategy and the main savings proposals
- carrying out budget-monitoring activity – for example, in areas where expenditure against budget looks to be well above or below forecasts, and where growth/savings targets and revised forecasts are involved
- undertaking some evaluation of performance and value for money
- maintaining a 'big picture' view of the

Case study

In 2017, Bristol City Council's Overview and Scrutiny Management Board reviewed how its scrutiny was working, to try to find new and better ways of working.

Eleven priority topics were identified, and each piece of scrutiny was to be conducted in a way most appropriate for the topic. One of the priority areas selected was the council's Medium-term Financial Plan. Because of the importance of this work, it was agreed that a commission would meet regularly to carry out this ongoing scrutiny.

Cllr Graham Morris (Con), Chair of Bristol's Business Change and Resources Scrutiny Commission, said: "For any large organisation, a clear financial strategy is essential.

"The work that is being undertaken will ensure a robust and rigorous framework for the Medium-term Financial Plan, which will then be reviewed on an annual basis.

"It will improve transparency, and ensure that all officers, residents, interested parties and members can have a single view of council finances."

financial pressures affecting the council and continuously challenging how these might impact on existing budgets and budget-setting in subsequent years. The LGA has recently revised its councillor workbook on finance scrutiny, to assist with this complex – and often challenging – aspect of their role.

It gives useful guidance on the principles and tasks involved in being an effective scrutineer, as well as advice and help with the process of financial scrutiny, budget setting and monitoring.

The workbook also gives some useful advice on: the determination of medium-term financial plans; the link between performance and expenditure; and how to develop an effective culture of scrutiny, based on consensual politics, robust challenge and accountability.



The LGA is running free masterclasses on commercial skills for councillors, on 22 February and 16 March, in Coventry. For more information and to sign up, please email Jamie Osowski on jamie.osowski@local.gov.uk 'A councillor's workbook on scrutiny of finance' can be downloaded from www.local.gov.uk/councillor-workbook-scrutiny-finance

elections

Looking ahead to May poll

The electoral landscape has changed significantly since 2014, and with it the prospects for this year's English local elections.

Four years ago, the locals coincided with the European Parliament contests in which UKIP topped the poll in both votes and seats. The party failed to match that feat at council level, but registered a strong third place everywhere except London and gained more than 150 seats.

Labour councillors won half the 4,000-odd seats up for grabs nationwide (and made 300 gains), with the Conservatives pegged back by more than 200 seats and losing control of 13 councils.

The 2018 elections mainly reprise these contests with a total of nearly 4,400 vacancies across 151 local authorities. However, 17 of these councils have inaugural elections on new boundaries and 14 of them have experienced boundary changes during the past four years. There are also mayoral elections in four London boroughs (Hackney, Lewisham, Newham, and Tower Hamlets) and in Watford.

With the obliteration of UKIP widely expected (the party failed to retain a single seat at the 2017 local elections) recent by-elections demonstrate how both Labour and the Conservatives could benefit from the fall-out.

The Labour gain in Hertsmere in January was in a ward the party has traditionally won, but where both UKIP and the BNP have polled well in the past. It did not help either that the outgoing Conservative councillor was disqualified, having been found guilty of a sexual assault offence.

On the other hand, the Conservatives in Hulton, Bolton, appear to have benefited directly from a further collapse in the UKIP vote in a ward that party won in 2014.



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



With the two main parties currently neck-and-neck, according to most opinion polls, there is scope for both to make gains this May.

In London, where in 2017 Labour won more than half of all votes cast at a General Election for the first time since the Attlee landslide of 1945, the party has its eyes on taking Barnet and even the former low poll tax flagship authority of Wandsworth directly from the Conservatives.

In the shires, conversely, the Conservatives will be aiming to make gains in some former UKIP hot spots such as Basildon, Cannock Chase, and Great Yarmouth, where it polled a third of the vote and more in 2014.

As always, the Liberal Democrats present more of a forecasting puzzle. Some of their local by-election victories in recent months have been spectacular; elsewhere they are finding it hard to break out from the dire performances common during their years in coalition with the Cameron government.

Can they bounce back in the south west London borough of Kingston upon Thames, which they lost directly to the Conservatives last time? Will the coincident mayoral and whole council contests in Watford serve to reaffirm their local strength there following a very distant third place at last year's General Election?



For more information on recent **local by-elections**, please visit www.local.gov.uk/first

local by-elections

Bolton, Hulton

CON GAIN FROM LAB

9.4% over Lab

Turnout 30.5%

Bournemouth, Throop and Muscliff

IND HELD

14.1% over Con

Turnout 24.5%

Hertsmere, Borehamwood Cowley Hill

LAB GAIN FROM CON

27.7% over Con

Turnout 19.2%

Kent, Birchington and Rural

CON HELD

37.5% over Lab

Turnout 17%

Lancashire, Wyre Rural Central

CON HELD

28.2% over Lab

Turnout 29%

Milton Keynes, Newport Pagnell North and Hanslope

CON HELD

28.2% over Lab

Turnout 32.3%

Rochford, Downhall and Rawreth

LIB DEM HELD

54% over Con

Turnout 20.7%

Thanet, Thanet Villages

CON HELD

24.4% over Lib Dem

Turnout 23.1%

Wyre, Preesall

CON HELD

10.5% over Lab

Turnout 35.6%

LGA18

THE NATIONAL VOICE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
#LGACONF18

ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION

3-5 JULY 2018 | INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE, BIRMINGHAM

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LGA Annual Fire Conference and Exhibition

13-14 March 2018, Hilton Hotel
Newcastle Gateshead

The LGA's Annual Fire Conference and Exhibition is a key event for senior fire officers and members of fire and rescue authorities. The terrible fire at Grenfell Tower has raised new questions about fire safety and the inspection and enforcement role of fire services. This is against a backdrop of continuing fire reform with implications for collaboration, recruitment, procurement, culture and standards, and the appointment of a new inspectorate.

Join us to discuss these changes, look at good practice and examine how we can develop this further.

To book your place visit: www.local.gov.uk/events

