

Debate on neighbourhood services provided by district councils and other local authorities

House of Lords

24 October 2019



Key messages

- The Local Government Association's (LGA) #CouncilsCan campaign has highlighted the work of councils delivering for their communities. As leaders of place, councils build desperately needed homes, create jobs and school places, provide dignified care for older and disabled people, and boost economic growth.
- District councils are at the heart of delivering on many of the key issues that matter to communities. This includes services such as housing, planning, waste and recycling services, as well as leisure centres, museums and parks.
- The levels of statutory homelessness is continuing to rise and 1.1 million people remain on council waiting lists. Solving the housing crisis will support people to live well for longer in their homes and will help relieve pressure on health and social care.
- Council planning departments are under-resourced and taxpayers are subsidising the costs of planning applications by around £200 million a year. A proactive, well-resourced planning system could do far more to deliver the additional homes the country needs.
- Waste and recycling services are used by all council taxpayers and represent the biggest spend in a council's budget. Any changes to waste services and additional costs must be fully funded to reduce the financial strain local government faces.
- Community assets such as parks are also inadequately resourced. Some councils are having to find innovative ways to keep parks open due to limited funding.
- The Spending Round provided councils with an additional £3.5 billion for council services, including an extra £1 billion for social care. With this investment, councils will be better able to ensure older and disabled people can live the lives they want to lead.
- While the announcements from the Spending Round were positive and demonstrated the Government listened to some of our concerns, other key services remain underfunded.
- The LGA and councils are successfully making the case that investing in local government is good for the nation's prosperity, economic growth and health and wellbeing. With new powers, funding and long-term certainty, councils will continue to lead their local areas and improve the lives of their residents.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

District councils are responsible for services such as housing, leisure and recreation, waste collection and planning.

Housing and homelessness

The £422 million resource funding to help reduce homelessness and rough sleeping as announced in the Spending Review is welcome. We are pleased that the Government has listened to our concerns, meaning local authorities will be able to continue to prevent people from becoming homeless over the next year.

Councils need long-term funding to place homelessness services on a sustainable footing and prevent people from losing their home. Previously, the LGA has estimated that homelessness services are dealing with cost pressures from demand and inflation alone of £100 million each year.ⁱ Statutory homelessness continues to rise and 1.1 million remain on council housing waiting lists. This will remain unchanged unless a long-term solution is formulated.

It is well known that providing people with good quality housing supports people to live well for longer in their own homes and, alongside adapting existing housing where the majority of people live, will help relieve pressure on health and social care.

Planning

Planning is not a barrier to building with councils approving nine in 10 planning applications and granting permission for more than 360,000 homes in the year to March 2019.ⁱⁱ Councils are working hard to use planning effectively to deliver the right kinds of homes. Despite this planning departments remain severely under-resourced and taxpayers are subsidising the costs of planning applications by around £200 million a year.ⁱⁱⁱ A proactive, well-resourced planning system could do far more to deliver the additional homes the country desperately needs.

We are pleased that the Government enabled planning authorities to raise fees by an initial 20 per cent in 2018.^{iv} A recent survey of councils shows that this resulted in more than 180 new posts being created in planning departments.^v A further 20 per cent increase, which the Government consulted on last year, should urgently be introduced or all local planning authorities, so that councils are fully able to facilitate local housing and infrastructure development. Alongside this, the Government should pilot a fair and transparent scheme of local fee setting, giving them the flexibility to set appropriate fees to reflect local circumstances.

Waste and recycling

Waste and recycling services are used by all council taxpayers and represent the third biggest spend item in a council's budget. Expenditure by councils on waste services and the rate of recycling both increased substantially from 2000 to 2010. Since 2010 we have continued to increase recycling at a modest rate of growth even though central government funding for councils has reduced by around 60 per cent.^{vi}

The Government's Resources and Waste Strategy is a significant step in the right direction to improving waste and recycling services. The LGA has long called for businesses and manufacturers to pay the full cost of recycling or disposing of their packaging, and we are pleased the Government has listened to us. We agree with the Government that even more needs to be done to boost recycling rates, raise standards and meet national targets.

Any changes to waste services and additional cost burdens on councils need to be fully funded, as local government is under substantial financial pressure. We are seeking further clarification and detail from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in order to fully understand the financial implications of the reforms.

Parks

Local authorities are responsible for the majority of the estimated 27,000 parks and green spaces in the UK. Due to financial pressures, councils are struggling to continue to maintain parks. They have been exploring a range of models for continuing to maintain their valued parks and green spaces, including working with voluntary groups, establishing trusts, and income generating events and activities

It is disappointing that the Government's Parks Action Group will not receive renewed funding this year. The group has developed a strong business case for parks which outlines their contribution to health and wellbeing, as well their positive impact on house prices, biodiversity and tourism. For instance, Fields in Trust published research that calculates parks' contribution to wellbeing to be at £34.2 billion per year to the adult population; and saves the NHS £111 million per year based solely on the reduction in numbers of GP visits.^{vii}

Leisure facilities

Councils in England own and run a variety of leisure facilities including grass and artificial grass pitches, swimming pools, sports halls, health and fitness centres, and public parks. Participation in physical activity is crucial in maintaining good physical and mental health. It is medically proven that people who do regular physical activity have up to a 3 per cent lower risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, up to an 83 per cent lower risk of osteoarthritis, up to a 30 per cent lower risk of depression and up to a 3 per cent lower risk of dementia.^{viii} It is important that local authorities maintain their ability to provide sports and physical activity services, especially in more disadvantaged communities.

But many of these leisure facilities are ageing, particularly swimming pools, and could be updated to better meet the needs of communities, be more energy efficient and more cost-effective to run. The Government has recently announced an important £250 million investment in cultural facilities. They should match this commitment by making a much needed investment in our sports and physical activity infrastructure and bolstering Sport England's facilities fund.

Culture

District councils are often responsible for maintaining key cultural infrastructure, preserving the heritage of communities in local museums, and affording opportunities for residents to come together for shared experiences in theatres and community venues. The Mendoza Review of Museums^{ix} found that local authority museums were experiencing the most challenges of any type of museum, with many struggling to repair crumbling buildings. The LGA and Arts Council England have provided advice and guidance to showcase how some councils are addressing these issues, and the new £250 million Cultural Infrastructure Fund will provide financial support to many areas. There needs to be a concerted investment in the skills of the sector to ensure museums and theatres continue to be viable businesses within our communities.

ⁱ LGA, Local government funding: Moving the conversation on (<https://www.local.gov.uk/moving-the-conversation-on/funding>)

ⁱⁱ MHCLG, Planning Applications in England: January to March 2019 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812867/Planning_Applications_January_to_March_2019_-_statistical_release.pdf)

ⁱⁱⁱ LGA, 'Development deadlock: council planning departments 'hampered' by missing out on £70 million' (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/development-deadlock-council-planing-departments-hampered-missing-out-ps70-million-lga>)

^{iv} The Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2017/1314/introduction/made>)

^v PAS & LGA, Survey of planning departments 2019 <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/pas-topics/monitoring/survey-planning-departments-2019>

^{vi} LGA analysis

^{vii} Revaluing parks and green spaces, Fields in Trust 2018

^{viii} <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/>

^{ix} The Mendoza Review: An independent review of museums in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england>)