

Local Government Association response to the Casey review on integration

December 2017



Briefing

Key messages

- The Local Government Association welcomes the helpful insight provided by the Dame Louise Casey review into opportunity and integration.
- The country is experiencing an evolving context on community cohesion issues. Against a backdrop of tensions highlighted by the referendum on leaving the European Union and threat of extremism and terrorism, local cohesion challenges vary considerably from place to place.
- Opportunity and integration, the two main themes of the review, are unequivocally linked to social mobility and aspiration; and in turn, to access to good quality education, jobs and housing.
- Local government has a key role to play in all of these services, but their powers to progress them have been eroded by successive governments.
- As the country looks to move forward after our withdrawal from the EU, councils must now be given the tools that can help them improve opportunities cohesion in all local areas.

Detailed response

The Local Government Association welcomes the insight provided by Dame Louise Casey review into opportunity and integration.¹ The learning from the review has already contributed to a range of LGA activity on the issue of cohesion, including the development of a suite of guidance documents and learning events for councillors and officers. Going forward, we will be considering the implications of the review's findings for our current leadership and induction offer. We are also highlighting the review's conclusions around segregation in the context of our call for Government to strengthen councils' powers in relation to all local schools and children who are home schooled.

While the issues highlighted in the review are not new to local councils, it is extremely helpful for them to be considered afresh. We look forward to the Government's forthcoming and draft integration strategy in response to the paper. However, this paper provides an opportunity to set out a local government perspective on the key issues in the review relating to local places, and councils as leaders of them, specifically:

- social and economic exclusion
- segregation between different communities
- the need for discourse and political leadership on cohesion issues, and
- standards in public office.

Social and economic exclusion

¹ Our understanding of the review's meaning of integration is that it refers to the importance of all of our communities being fully integrated into local places and economies, as well as into a common vision and British values

The review cited social and economic progress as perhaps the most important indicator of successful integration, with socio-economic exclusion amongst some groups a sign of integration failure. Warning of the risks when socio-economic exclusion correlates with segregation, the review also highlighted evidence of poorer households in the majority White British population falling behind in terms of attainment, employment and deprivation.

Councils fully understand the importance of aspiration, opportunity and social mobility in creating cohesive communities: all councils want to do as much as possible to promote inclusive growth that benefits everyone in their communities. However, the ability for councils to influence social and economic exclusion and poor life chances is currently constrained by the lack of levers available to them on key issues such as education, local economic growth and housing. Our recent report on the local impacts of welfare reform reiterated our call for devolution on these issues, highlighting concern that some households are struggling to increase their income from employment or reduce their outgoings sufficiently to manage reductions in benefits income. The disproportionate impact of these changes on some groups in our communities increases inequality and undermines socio-economic integration.

Despite the limitations, the issue of socio-economic development and opportunity is one that local government is focusing on, independently of the cohesion agenda, in terms of the need for locally-led economic growth that addresses social and economic inequalities both across and within regions. However, there is now a need for both the sector and the LGA to explicitly link these agendas, to make clear how empowering councils to deliver local growth and restoring powers on education and housing will also benefit community cohesion.

On **education**, the importance of good school as a basis for aspiration and future mobility is clearly critical. Over 90% of maintained schools are good or outstanding, emphasising the importance councils place in supporting young people in their areas to learn and develop. A smaller number of schools outside local authority control are performing at this level, and the LGA believes that councils that have an excellent track record in school improvement should have the power to set up Multi Academy Trusts and take over failing academies and free schools. This reflects the need (set out in full in the following section) for councils to have greater strategic control and powers that enable them to fully shape local education provision in their areas in line with local requirements.

On the **economy and local growth**, councils and the LGA have long argued that only locally led solutions can respond to local economic and skills needs, and that councils should therefore be able to design local services accordingly. Economic growth, skills and jobs policies must reflect the very different economic and geographic bases of their areas: a one size fits all approach led by Whitehall is simply not fit for purpose.

As we set out in our response to the industrial strategy, our Work Local and Growing Places publications and Budget submission, the only way to coordinate services coherently for residents of all ages and for local employers is through more devolution on employment support, careers advice, the skills system and business support. Funding made available through the EU's shared prosperity fund, and its successor, should also be devolved to local areas to enable them to direct it most effectively in line with the overall objectives of the programme.

High quality, well maintained infrastructure, such as transport and broadband, which connects people to each other, to the workplace, and to public services is vital to ensuring that communities and individuals are not isolated from society

and can play a full part in the success of the local economy. Currently, there is a mismatch between national funding for local infrastructure and public transport, such as roads and buses, compared to that received by national infrastructure agencies, such as Highways England and Network Rail. The funding that Government does provide to councils for local infrastructure is uncertain in nature, fragmented across different funding streams, with different rules, and also allocated competitively. This can lead to poorer outcomes for local people, making it more difficult for councils to support public and community transport and leading to a lack of suitable travel alternatives such as cycling and walking. The Government needs to pool infrastructure funding, and devolve as much as possible to local areas so that they can deliver the right infrastructure for local people, meeting current and future housing needs and to support economic growth.

Access to good quality, affordable **housing** is at the heart of an individual's sense of security and place, but the housing market is broken. As well as the stresses placed on individuals and families through living in poor quality or temporary housing, or where high housing costs squeeze disposal income, pressure on limited housing resources can and clearly has in some places had a negative impact on relations between different groups within communities. With demand for housing outgrowing the supply of housing, pressure on existing stock can lead to overcrowding, which may be a cause of community tension. Additionally, rising insecurity of housing creates increased churn and reduced stability that can make building a strong community difficult.

Councils should be clear, open and transparent about the basis for allocating their own housing placements, and the entitlement of different groups and newcomers to access support. In some areas, this may mean myth busting inaccurate perceptions that have developed.

But the bigger contribution that councils can make in this area, if empowered and enabled to financially, is to help address the shortfall in housing by building additional new homes. Local government has consistently called on Government to lift the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap to provide financial flexibilities for councils to build new homes. Government should also develop a new definition of affordable housing based on actual affordability rather than prices in a housing market acknowledged to be broken.

As set out above, Government must also devolve housing funding alongside infrastructure funds. Placed based budgets bringing together the affordable housing programme, housing infrastructure fund and others would enable councils to join up local investment in a way that supports local economies and growth and meets unmet demand for local housing.

The devolution agenda is beginning to deliver initial progress on local government's call for stronger powers to support and shape their economically. But this agenda needs to move more quickly and more widely. Local government has seen a successive removal of powers over three decades, with key areas such as growth, skills, housing and education managed from Whitehall. As the Casey review demonstrates, this approach has failed many of our communities and contributed to fissures in our society. Government has a clear role to play in reversing this; but the starting point must be to further empower local areas and councils to respond.

Segregation between communities

No council would expect to dictate where different communities live or who they should mix with. But it is clearly important to cohesion that different groups have opportunities to come together and, as the Casey review noted, that children in

particular should understand the country in which they are growing up in.

Councils have a clear and multi-faceted role in creating spaces and opportunities to bring individuals and communities together, whether through local events and festivals, the provision of public amenities or as an employer of a local workforce that is representative of local communities. Although austerity has made this more difficult, all councils can review their activities in this space, and consider their progress on their workforce.

For children and young people, meeting people of different backgrounds in their early years is formative. However, the Casey Review noted that school populations are even more segregated than residential settlement patterns, and that lack of social mobility was a factor in the segregation of residential and school communities.

These are not easy issues to manage. There are tensions between education and cohesion issues associated with single sex or religious schools in some areas, as well as considerations such as parental choice and differing gender performance in some types of schools to balance. However, councils' ability to take a holistic view and ensure that school populations reflect local populations and promote integration have been eroded by changes to the education system that reduce their control over local schools provision. Government policy has changed so that academies and free schools are their own admissions authorities and any concerns about how the admission or exclusion of children is dealt with can only be managed via Regional Schools Commissioners. As a consequence, schools that do behave improperly know they can do so unchallenged and game the system

The need to think about broader issues such as cohesion supports the LGA's call for councils to have powers and duties around place-planning, schools admissions and protecting vulnerable children that apply equally to all schools, including free schools and academies. The current system, in which councils have duties but limited powers over schools in their area, not only hinders the efficient provision of school placements but also makes it difficult to take into account wider societal issues for which councils have a responsibility. The examples provided by LGA member authorities of free schools selected on religious intake or based in mono-cultural areas being opened against the wishes of democratically elected local councils is an indictment of an overly centralised and unaccountable system of schools management that is not sufficiently linked in to either local or even wider Government priorities.

The LGA is therefore calling for legislation to be changed to: firstly, to give councils the power to direct academies to expand to meet local demand for new places and admit vulnerable and excluded pupils; and secondly, to ensure councils to have the lead role in commissioning new free schools to make sure they provide places where they are most needed and do not destabilise existing good and outstanding schools.

The Casey review also raised a specific educational concern about the growth in home schooling in some places, and associated rise in illegal schools, noting that *'some people might be using the right to home education and its relatively lax regime to place their children in unregistered and illegal schools.'*

The LGA shares concern about this issue. This is a further area of education where councils have duties without powers, with the responsibility to oversee home schooling undermined by the fact that they have no real powers to check

the nature of the home education a child is receiving. Others have also raised concerns, with the Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield estimating just 25% of the 50,000 children being home educated are children being home educated in the usual sense of the term, and Ofsted calling for powers to enter illegal schools.

We believe that there is a need to address this issue. While the vast majority of parents who home educate their children do a fantastic job and work well with their local council to make sure that a good education is being provided, we are concerned that not all children are registered as home schooled, particularly where they have never joined the mainstream education system, or have moved to a different area. There is a clear need to ensure that the right to home schooling is not being abused by people who wish to promote views and values that are at odds with British values, and who by doing so pose a safeguarding risk to individual children, as well as a fundamental risk to our society as a whole

We believe that placing a legal duty on parents to register home-schooled children with their local authority would help councils to monitor how children are being educated, and prevent children from 'disappearing' from the oversight of services designed to keep them safe. To complement this, councils should also be given powers to fulfil their duty to ensure that a suitable education is being provided to all children who are home schooled. Any new duty would need to be accompanied by sufficient funding for it to be used effectively.

The need for discourse and political leadership on cohesion issues

In the review, Dame Louise urged local and other elected officials to show political leadership on issues relating to cohesion and migration, citing examples where the failure to do so has had serious consequences and ultimately undermined cohesion.

Cohesion challenges vary considerably from place to place and across communities, and there is no single, off the shelf solution for emboldening councillors to tackle difficult and sensitive local issues. We accept the call for brave leadership set down in the review, although note the risk that by standing up to communities and telling them things they don't want to hear, good councillors may not be re-elected and will lose the opportunity for positive influence.

While councillors, both individually and collectively, must have the courage to show leadership, at the corporate level councils must support them to do so, in particular where an issue may invoke strong feelings or even harassment.

The LGA recognises our leading role in equipping councillors with the skills and knowledge they need to show leadership on difficult issues, and in sharing best practice across our members:

- Our existing offer for councillors already includes modules on community leadership and handling difficult conversations, as well as on facilitation and conflict resolution.
- Alongside this, in 2017 we have introduced new leadership essentials courses on counter-extremism and Prevent, to provide support to councillors working on two important cohesion issues. These courses are open to all councillors and we encourage them to take up the offer.
- We believe there may be additional support that could be developed in terms of induction programmes for new councillors to help them understand some of the difficult issues they may come across (such as child sexual exploitation, Prevent etc), and what is expected of them in dealing with these issues.

- We will also explore what focused support we may be able to provide to councillors in regard to having difficult conversations, leading political discourse on challenging issues and engaging with the media and public debates - building on our recent new conversations project, which provides a detailed resource for councils on engaging with communities.

Alongside this, we make the offer to all our members to provide bespoke support to areas or individual councillors that feel that they are struggling with this agenda, whether at the political or community level. And of course, the LGA's political groups will also continue their own work with local parties and councillors to help develop local leadership and promote behaviours that respect our norms of equality and diversity.

Standards in public office

The review also highlighted the issue of standards in public office; an issue linked in part to cohesion, but which also extends much more widely. We understand that the Committee on Standards in Public Life intends to undertake a review of this wider area at some point during 2018.

Since the Casey review was published, the Government has consulted on proposals to extending the disqualification criteria for councillor to include anyone who is on the sex offenders register, or anyone subject to an anti-social behaviour sanction issued by a court. The LGA's response to the consultation, which supported the proposal on disbaring sex offenders but called for parity of approach with holders of other office, is published here. [*link to be inserted once draft response approved*]

Councils are required operate robust local arrangements to ensure the highest standards of conduct amongst their councillors, but out of a total of more than 19,000 elected councillors in England and Wales, there are very few instances of serious wrongdoing.

However, we can always strive to improve. The LGA supports the objective of ensuring the highest standards of integrity among local councillors by working with our member organisations and councillors to promote conduct and leadership that is in line with the seven principles of standards in public life. We continue to believe that a sector-led approach is the appropriate way to manage council performance, and would not support a return to the architecture of the Standards Board.

Probity in office and leadership runs throughout the LGA's existing improvement offer and support offer, with support and learning on member behaviour encompassed in the following:

- Specific training on leadership is provided through a variety of courses and modules, including the leaders' programme; top team development; leadership academy; next generation courses, and focus on leadership
- Our regional peer support networks are focused on local leadership, including identifying and resolving any issues upfront.
- Leadership is a key focus of the corporate governance theme of our corporate peer review process. The LGA expects that in future all its member councils should engage with the corporate peer challenge process and undertake a peer challenge within the expected timetable.

Political parties and the LGA's political groups also play a key role in supporting high standards among councillors, both through applying rigorous selection

procedures and through the support they provide to their councillors.

We are not, and will not become, complacent about councillor conduct and integrity, and will continue our existing work to strengthen council and councillor performance. But we also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the locally elected officials who work tirelessly to support their local communities, often in difficult circumstances, and help make their areas better places to live.