

LGA Special Interest Group Annual Report to LGA Board

SIG Name:	District Councils' Network
Lead Member:	Cllr John Fuller OBE (Chair of the DCN Executive)
Lead Officer(s):	Bill Cullen (Chair of the DCN CEO Group) and Nick Porter (DCN Director)

Email:	dcn@local.gov.uk
Address:	18 Smith Square, Westminster, SQ1P 3HZ
Website:	https://districtcouncils.info/

Membership

*180 District Councils (all District Councils in membership of the LGA)
3 Unitary Councils*

Aim

The District Councils' Network (DCN) is a cross-party member led network of 183 councils. We are a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA), and provide a single voice for district services within the Local Government Association.

District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people – 40% of the population – and cover 68% of the country by area. District councils have a proven track record of building better lives and bigger economies in the areas that they serve. Districts protect and enhance quality of life by safeguarding our environment, promoting public health and leisure, whilst creating attractive places to live, raise families and build a bigger economy. By tackling homelessness and promoting wellbeing, District councils ensure no one gets left behind by addressing the complex needs of today whilst attempting to prevent the social problems of tomorrow.

Key Activities / Outcomes of work undertaken

We are a positive and collaborative partner within the LGA and wider local government family. A selection of our work over the year is highlighted below:

- Leading the call resisting enforced local government reform during the pandemic, pushing a range of evidenced arguments to Government, to Parliamentarians directly and through the APPG for Districts, the press and our partners. For instance [Power in Place](#) set out the need for devolution to empower districts to deliver the recovery, [Bigger is not Better](#) challenged poor arguments for reform into less local government being forced on places, [Size Doesn't Matter](#) – jointly supported with our Unitary Council Network colleagues – provided a pragmatic route forward for devolution, and [Transformation in Localities](#) looked at how to build on districts strengths. Our positions have been widely covered in media, for instance [Times](#), [BBC](#), and more.
- We've led the charge to have government recognise the serious financial challenges facing districts, working to ensure [our position and recommendations](#) are recognised by Ministers and officials. We've given written and oral evidence to the HCLG inquiries, engaged Parliamentarians, commissioned research, and pushed warnings through the press, for instance on [BBC](#) and [BBC online](#). We've engaged Government on proposed reforms to the New Homes Bonus, making a strong case for the retention and reform of the house

building incentive to help drive the recovery. We've developed an evidence base highlighting the challenges local authorities have faced around external audit, engaging with CIPFA and PSAA.

- Our efforts have helped to secure wide ranging financial support over 2020-21 and 2021-22 - including a fresh round of New homes Bonus reward, a decision not to reset business rates for 2021/22, £318m in covid grant funding, a new Lower Tier Services Grant, and schemes to compensate for loss of income from sales, fees and charges. Each District will benefit in line with their own circumstances and spending need, but if this was split evenly across every District Council, it could equate to circa £6.7m. This does not include scheme to compensate 75% of irrecoverable business rate and council tax losses for 2020-21.
- We have been [championing the role of districts](#) at the heart of local economies at the centre of Government, helping BEIS Ministers and officials towards shaping workable business grant schemes, putting districts at the centre of efforts to re-open high streets and businesses safely, and running a campaign pushing [our position](#) on controversial proposals for planning reform. Our positions have been covered for instance in the [Evening Standard](#), [Independent](#) and [Mirror](#). We continue to engage with the wider proposals within the Planning White Paper and to work to ensure districts can play a lead role in the future of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Levelling up fund, housing infrastructure funding, high street funding and more.
- Districts will play a lead role working with businesses and partners to deliver the economic recovery, which we've highlighted through positions and evidence. For instance through our [5 point manifesto for the recovery](#), which included a focus on high streets recognised through the allocation of High Streets reopening fund and wider strategy for town centres through the Future High Streets Fund and Towns Fund.
- We quickly raised the critical plight of our leisure centres with Ministers and officials, working with Districts to develop the first and detailed financial evidence base calling for additional funding to the sector, raising public attention to the issue through the coverage in [BBC](#), [PoliticsHome](#), [Telegraph](#). We have continued to quickly assess the position of leisure centres as the pandemic progressed and provided further evidence on likely closures, featured in [The Guardian](#).
- We've led engagement with Defra on the waste reforms, providing evidenced submissions for all recent Resources & Waste Strategy consultations. We've put forward a strong case for local government authority over waste services, and input into the development of the schemes proposed. Our work and on this has been covered in [The Mirror](#) and [The Sun](#).
- Districts provide the local safety net for so many families in hardship. Our recent report on ensuring [No-One is Left Behind](#) is widely read and covered extensively in the press, including [Daily Mail](#), [Inews](#), and more. We have continued to push for districts to have the tools to help those most vulnerable, 'everyone-in' has proven what is possible and we were the first to warn of increases in homeless acceptances, our campaign was widely covered by [BBC](#), the [Observer](#), successfully campaigning for extensions to the eviction ban. And more recently our report on increased food bank use was prominently featured by the [Observer](#).
- We have pushed for help for people on low incomes to self-isolate, with our campaign widely covered in the [Sun](#) and the [Times](#). Meanwhile we have ensured district officers are working with Government on designing the T&T self-isolating support payment scheme so that it is workable. We continue to press for a lead role for districts schemes supporting people in hardship.
- We have been proactive in working closely with the Cabinet Office to address the challenges posed by the May elections – forming a working group of Chief Executives to work through the practical challenges, and shaping Government policy and support. Our message to voters on polling day was widely covered, for instance by [Daily Mail](#), [Daily Express](#) and others.
- These are just some of the issues we have worked on, others include waste reforms, high streets and town centres, and more.
- You can read all our consultation responses on our website www.dcn@local.gov.uk

Events - Bringing districts together

- *Bookings open!* We're working on bringing you our in-person conference on 21-22 October, details here: <https://districtcouncils.info/events/dcn-annual-conference-2021/>
- Since the start of the pandemic, DCN have increased our engagement with Districts - moving to regular online calls, with over 25 sessions bringing notable speakers into your offices (or living rooms!); deepening our relationship with Ministers and officials to offer them advice at pace; and making sure the district voice is heard in the right zoom-rooms at the right time. We regularly average between 250-300 leaders and chief executives on these calls, and your feedback on them is always gratefully received so we can make them as relevant and informative as possible.
- We've hosted workshops for district officers on key policy issues – often in partnership with the LGA – on matters such as the planning reforms, business support grants, audit and finance, self-isolating payments and more.
- We've continued to build our parliamentary profile – holding four APPG meetings since last April, attended by 377 parliamentarians, officials and councillors. We regularly circulate MP briefings with key evidence at crucial times, and have held a series of MP briefing sessions
- Throughout the pandemic our Executive has met fortnightly, and Chief Executive Group weekly, pushing our engagement with senior officials at MHCLG and BEIS, seeking to highlight the issues of concern to districts, and influence government thinking.
- While the pandemic sadly forced us to postpone the year's Staff Development Programme, we were pleased to host a virtual closing event for this year's cohort, and look forward to starting to plan for the next cohort as the public health situation allows.