

LGA's ' Hot Topics'

The following priority issues reflect the short term needs for councils in order to deal with the COVID crisis as well as topical policy issues.

National lockdown – We are working daily with councils on the immediate issues facing communities as result of the national lockdown. Particularly, we are addressing pressure on schools, supporting compliance with lockdown rules, the rollout of vaccines, community testing and councils' role in planning for the post-lockdown period.

Finances – The Spending Review went some way towards meeting core spending pressures and estimated COVID-19 costs in 2021/22, but only if councils make full use of council tax raising powers. The SR did not address the underlying pressures and urgent need for investment in early intervention, adult social care and public health. The worrying COVID-19 trends and the new national lockdown also mean that the funding package for 2020/21 must be revisited to cover councils for all cost pressures and income losses.

Immediate Covid Issues:

School and early years – School leaders are raising concerns about the pressures between supporting vulnerable children and children of key workers in schools, whilst managing online learning and having to make tough decisions about balancing the number of children. The updated key worker and vulnerable children guidance mean there are a higher number of children who could need to attend school, and therefore continue to spread the new variant of Covid in the community. Government must ensure that all pupils have laptops or tablets to be able to access online lessons to ensure that they do not fall any further behind in their studies, and to reduce the numbers of pupils who have to be at school. We have called for Ofsted to postpone the resumption of Ofsted monitoring inspections. Early years settings are to stay open to all children and young people throughout this lockdown. There has been some guidance clarifying the funding situation but concerns remain regarding funding and sustainability.

Schools testing – continuing concerns over logistics associated with secondary school return to school testing and associated transport requirements, including managing pupils testing positive on-site. DfE had received advice from PHE that due to the increased transmission of the new virus strain, the 7-day contact tracing using the LFD test will not go ahead in secondary schools. The focus will be on testing secondary school pupils in the week prior to return and the twice-weekly testing of primary and secondary staff.

Vaccination – We continue to press for a clearer role for councils in the rollout of the national vaccination programme, including identifying best vaccination sites, and ease of access for local people; some people may need support to get vaccinated closer to home/in own home; councils need real time data on when clinically extremely vulnerable individuals will be vaccinated and national plan for rollout to remaining priority groups so they can plan logistics, communications and build trust in local delivery of the vaccination programme .We are already hearing about councils wishing to change the national priority groupings for vaccination; many will be lobbied by interest groups unhappy with where they sit in the priority list; risk will be of councils breaking away from the national formula leading to differences of interpretation and a 'postcode lottery'

Vaccination-cohort 2 – The Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for frontline care staff caring for those clinically vulnerable to COVID-19 in community settings has been published, with councils responsible for identifying and notifying those eligible for vaccination in this priority group, which includes ALL providers, not just those commissioned by the council, and is a significant logistical exercise, and will also mean fielding queries from providers and staff wishing to check their eligibility

Lockdown regulations – There is a request for a review of the guidance on places of worship and communal prayer where there is concern about distancing. It is also unclear

from the guidance if religious education in informal settings such as a madrasas are allowed to take place.

Asymptomatic testing – Following the expansion of targeted community testing to identify asymptomatic individuals using lateral flow devices (LFDs), consideration needs to be given during the national lockdown to its impact on local test and trace systems once restrictions are lifted, including the role of targeted community testing. Councils need clear advice on the appropriate application of different testing tools in different community settings, taking into account the risks and benefits, and how and when LFDs can genuinely add value to local outbreak management plans and priorities. For example, the low sensitivity of LFDs may be of acceptable risk in a school setting but raise concerns in a Care Home setting. This includes concerns about the use of LFDs to avoid self-isolation, as currently proposed in schools.

Test and trace systems – Councils have been seeking a localised system which is nationally enabled since the pandemic began and need sufficient resources to build up their tracing teams, achieving an integrated local and national approach. More localised test and trace will engage 'difficult to reach' groups. Testing and tracing needs to be embedded as it is likely to be needed into the future, even with the vaccination programme, to continue to manage transmission of the virus. The resource implications need to be considered.

Test and Trace support payments – The increase in the transmission of the virus has led to increased pressure on both the discretionary and non-discretionary elements of the T&T support payments. The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) has made an additional £20.4m available until the end of January (of which £10m is for 'discretionary' payments). DHSC have also extended the scheme until the end of March. Funding for the main scheme and administration costs will be reviewed at the end of January, and DHSC are also discussing the potential for reviewing the eligibility criteria. Funding for the discretionary element has once again been fixed, which continues to cause consternation in councils who will run out before the end of March.

While changes to the scheme may be needed, these must be designed in consultation with councils and implemented with extreme care and clear messaging to avoid causing further confusion and delays. There is also need for greater integration between MHCLG work on 'non-financial support' and the DHSC-led work on T&T payments. We are pressing for this with both departments. Councils need sufficient funding to ensure the payments can deliver on the policy objectives of supporting households at risk of financial hardship and stopping the spread of the virus. Some councils are also concerned about the costs of administration and pressures on their revenues and benefits teams.

Care homes – Care providers are facing significant financial and staffing pressures and other pressures including the roll out of the vaccination programme to care homes, the implementation of infection control measures including increased testing of staff, residents and visitors, and the discharge of Covid-positive patients to 'designated' settings from hospital. The additional grant of £149m to support increased testing, plus an extra £120m just announced for extra staffing is welcome but may not be enough. Care providers are still struggling to get the necessary insurance to enable them to accept COVID + patients and Government have been reluctant to take action on this despite calls from the LGA ADASS and provider organisations. **Vaccination** of staff and residents in care homes (over 65s) is well underway; some vaccine hesitancy reported among care home staff and managers has been reported

Public Services – Capacity issues remain a very significant challenge in many areas.

Compliance and enforcement – with the Government focusing again on how compliance and enforcement work can help prevent the spread of the virus, councils are being asked to refocus their efforts in the coming weeks on supermarkets and other retail premises which

remain open. We are highlighting the work councils are doing in this space and sharing best practice to support this.

Longer term Covid planning:

Councils need a longer-term strategy for maintaining the lockdown, any possible return to the new tier system and clear guidance over the events that will be affected by continuing restrictions in the months ahead. We also need to start looking further into the future, and whether measures such as test and trace, support/incentives for self-isolation, and some enforcement measures need to become established for the longer-term.

Elections & Democracy – Councils need certainty that they will be legally allowed to hold decision-making meetings remotely and flexibly beyond the beginning of May 2021. If legislation is required then this should be brought forward as soon as possible. We continue to seek assurances from government that the additional costs involved in running elections in May should be fully reimbursed by the government. Local elections need to be held safely and all eligible voters should be able to vote and that candidates and political parties also need to be able to campaign safely and fairly.

Culture, leisure & sport – The LGA has been making the case for supportive investment to tide these services over until footfall returns to sustainable numbers: this has resulted in councils being eligible for the £1.75 billion cultural recovery fund, receiving £100 million for outsourced leisure providers, and £1000 per library service to expand their e-book offer. However, it is still not enough to sustain public leisure long-term and there is a real risk of closure of many facilities in 2021.

Children's services – An independent review of children's social care was launched on 15 January. This will cover the increasing demands on the system and bring in the voices of care experienced young people. The impact of the pandemic is expected to significantly increase the need for children's services. The £300 million announced for adult and children's social care in the Spending Review is not sufficient. How will councils be supported to increase capacity and resources to support children and families to overcome short-term difficulties and avoid these escalating into crises?

PPE supply – The current arrangement for free supply of PPE extended to end of June 2021 and a review will commence in April looking to the longer term.

Economic vulnerability – The mainstream benefits system should be the principal safety net for low-income households. We are asking Government to maintain the £20pw uplift in Universal Credit into 2021/22 if - as is likely – evidence shows that this is still needed. Councils have delivered a range of vital short-term, crisis support. Supporting people to recover financially requires the local knowledge and strong relationships that councils are best placed to provide. We need to move towards a more sustainable, preventative approach to economic and financial wellbeing to secure an effective recovery. We also need clarity on the sustainability of key VCS partners.

Exiting the pandemic – We need a clear joint strategy for moving the country out of the pandemic. This includes the need to look at the Coronavirus Act 2020 in advance of May 2021 and an urgent review of councils' statutory duties to allow capacity on Covid-19 response and help with inevitable staff absences. Our offer to help co-design the strategy and agree shared priorities for the next three months still stands.

Other issues of immediate importance for the sector:

EU Exit – The Government and the EU have agreed a future trade deal. Any new LG responsibilities must be seen in the context of all the winter pressures on councils, including the impact of recent border controls on port towns. We will be monitoring key issues,

including added pressure on port towns and regulatory services and whether there is an adequacy decision on data protection.

Free School Meals – The Government has announced that it will not be providing free school meals over February half-term and that councils should provide them using funding allocated under the Covid Winter Grant Scheme. We have highlighted that this grant money has already been allocated for other support and was never intended to replicate or replace free school meals. We are calling on the Government to continue to provide food vouchers over half-term, for uplifts in benefits to be retained and for separately identified funding for local welfare schemes to be restored.

Social Care – The Spending Review (SR) provides some new funding for adult social care; this will help address some, but not all, pressures facing councils. We continue to make the point that the precept is not a sustainable, long-term solution. The SR announced proposals for ‘sustainable improvement’ of adult social care will be brought forward next year.

NHS Reform – The LGA has [published its submission](#) to the NHSEI consultation on the future of integrated care systems. We are urging NHSE and DHSC to actively engage with councils locally, regionally and nationally in further developing proposals for collaboration to improve health and care services and improve health and wellbeing outcomes.

Economic Recovery – We need continued national/local collaboration, especially to shape the future UKSPF and Levelling Up funds. There is an offer to co-design from the sector. We also need to support councils to equip them with skills required to lead their communities towards recovery and renewal.

Planning Reform – We still await a Government response to the White Paper consultation and the remaining proposals from the ‘Current changes to the planning system’ consultation. The government has responded to the proposals to update the standard method for calculating local housing need.