

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 – Current priorities are responding to the Government roadmap for easing of lockdown restrictions, as well as the continuing rollout of vaccines, reviewing local outbreak management plans including plans for surge testing and councils' role in planning for post-lockdown period and recovery.

Finances – The 2020 Spending Review (SR) 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 or public health. The COVID-19 funding package for 2020/21 and 2021/22 must be revisited to cover councils for all cost pressures and income losses, and the Government should announce a multi-year funding settlement for local government as soon as possible.

Immediate Covid Issues:

Schools – All children returned to school on 8 March, with three tests in school in the first two weeks before moving to home testing and wider family testing. We continue to raise the impact on educational attainment and mental wellbeing, particularly for lower income and vulnerable children.

Refresh of the National Contain Framework – with the expected focus on local outbreak management to support unlocking and manage future outbreaks, the refresh of the National Contain Framework needs to enable councils to undertake this role. Councils are being asked to refresh their Local Outbreak Management Plans by the end of March (with an interim deadline of 12 March) to further demonstrate the role of local government in enabling a local first approach to outbreak management. The Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) only provides funding until June 2021.

Compliance and enforcement – The COVID compliance fund has been rolled into overall Contain funding; we are awaiting clarity on government's expectations on how this will be used to support enforcement activity but highlighting that councils will be unable to sustain previous levels of activity without dedicated funding. Councils also want to help shape the reopening regulations before they are published. We are calling for longer lead in times for organisations wishing to arrange events, to ensure councils have time to scrutinise plans to ensure they are Covid secure.

Vaccination roll out – The increased pace of roll out, with all adults being offered their first vaccine by 31 July, is likely to increase the calls on councils to address unequal take-up and vaccine hesitancy, and local funding requirements need to be met to achieve this. Councils have been asked to work with community groups to encourage unpaid carers in booking their vaccines, with data collection requirements. Government needs to work with the sector on any framework for local prioritisation.

Vaccination data – The granularity of the data available to Directors of Public Health needs to improve so that councils can tackle vaccine hesitancy, vaccine refusal and 'no shows' as well as emerging inequalities. Publicly available vaccine data by local authority area is now available alongside STP, ICS and Regional level data.

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable - The list of people defined CEV has been expanded from 2.2 million by approx. 1.7m based on the interplay of wider risk factors. This also expands the priority group for vaccinations and those accessing employment support schemes. The Government has confirmed existing funding to councils will be extended for this group. The CEV group officially ends on 29 March and the impact of this requires consideration.

New variant surge testing – Government needs to set out as a matter of urgency how it will provide the additional resources required to meet the significant increased demands in those areas implementing surge testing for the South African and Brazilian Covid variants, and how surge testing will be funded in the future. The LGA is calling for data on the success of surge testing so far to be shared with councils and residents, so lessons can be learnt, and residents kept engaged. Not sharing the results undermines public trust.

Test and trace systems – There was no testing strategy in the Roadmap announcements, and no further details have yet emerged. There are growing demands on council testing systems from different employment sectors and councils need to be appropriately resourced to support this effectively, alongside building their teams, integrating the local and national approach, and embedding testing and tracing for future need.

Test and Trace support payments and practical support – The Government has confirmed that it will be providing £12.9 million funding per month to help councils meet the costs involved in assessing people's practical support needs and helping them access support. Government needs to ensure clear communication on the aims and purpose, recognise administrative costs and pressures on councils and improve integration with non-financial support. The Government is also planning to test a draft framework for non-financial practical support for people who are self-isolating this week to be followed by a readiness survey. We continue to push for this to be joined up with financial support, but have welcomed the funding the Government will provide to councils to support this work.

Care homes – Care providers still have significant financial and staffing pressures with testing, vaccinations, enabling 'named' visiting from 8 March, infection control measures and the discharge of Covid-positive patients to 'designated' settings from hospital, with no confirmation of any continuation funding beyond March 2021. Concerns remain about care home staff who've not yet been vaccinated. Government proposals for an indemnity scheme doesn't meet sector needs and is only on offer until March 31st.

Quarantine hotels – Councils have been raising concerns about the management of quarantine hotels, and the risk and appropriateness for more vulnerable groups, particularly unaccompanied children. We are seeking a discussion between affected councils and DHSC/DfE as a matter of urgency.

Longer term Covid planning:

Exiting the pandemic and long-term recovery – To live with Covid, we must embed Test, Trace and Isolate services and we still need the infrastructure in place to deal with outbreaks effectively. The LGA is stressing the need for urgent national-local collaboration on long-term recovery, especially to shape the future UKSPF and to prepare a local approach to future skills and employment where councils can make a significant contribution.

Remote meetings - The continuation of remote meetings continues to be a key issue and we are in discussion with MHCLG about the options for extending and making permanent the power to hold remote and hybrid meetings in primary or secondary legislation. Lawyers in Local Government and the Association of Democratic Services Officers have made a legal application to test whether councils already hold powers to hold online meetings.

Elections & Democracy – Local elections will go ahead in May. The Cabinet Office has now published [guidance on campaigning](#) from the 8 and 29 March and the Electoral Commission has published [guidance to support candidates and agents](#) through the electoral process, excluding campaigning. We continue to lobby on the costs associated with these elections and for clear public health guidance around key election activities.

Economic vulnerability – A sustainable, preventative approach to supporting low-income households requires effective integration between the national system and locally-tailored support. We are calling for the restoration of local welfare funding and a stronger emphasis on financial inclusion. We are asking Government to retain the £20pw uplift in Universal Credit for as long as it is needed.

Culture, leisure & sport – The LGA has been making the case for supportive investment to

tide these services over until footfall returns to sustainable numbers: the cultural recovery fund is welcome but it is not enough to sustain public leisure long-term and there is a real risk of closure of many facilities in 2021.

Children's services – Current DfE funded arrangements to support children and families below social care thresholds end on 31 March. This adds to concern around likely increasing demand for child, youth and family support as schools fully re-open and limited capacity in early help services. Councils must be supported to provide families with support when they need it, before problems escalate.

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.

Other issues of immediate importance for the sector:

Equalities – According to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission the impact of the pandemic has been unequal, entrenching existing inequalities and widened others.

The LGA is committed to addressing inequalities and is currently working to review and strengthen work around equalities, including promoting equality through our policy work, our improvement work and our leadership support to councils. This includes specific work around tackling health inequalities and inequalities highlighted by the pandemic.

Health and Social Care Bill/ White Paper – The Government's white paper on the future of health and social care has been published. The LGA has published a [briefing](#) which outlines the proposals, policy messages and initial reaction.

National Institute Health Protection (NIHP) and wider public health reforms – The Government will shortly publish its plans for the successor organisation to PHE. We are in discussions to ensure the establishment of NIHP provides an opportunity for local learning during the pandemic to inform future planning and delivery of health protection and resilience functions at a national, regional, system and local level.

Climate Change – Our [response](#) to the ten-point-plan reiterates that councils share the ambition for a green revolution and want to work with government and businesses to establish a national framework for addressing the climate emergency, supported with long term funding. We also continue to make the case that devolving powers to local areas will be critical to a green recovery, highlighting the LGA's [Local green jobs report](#). In advance of COP26, we are engaging with our national and international counterparts in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Brussels to identify shared outcomes for local government.

Digital – Covid-19 has brought digital inequity into stark focus with schools and home working. It is also an opportunity to maximize on the opportunities presented. We are supporting councils to close the digital divide through digital inclusion, connectivity and transformation.

UK/EU trade – We are aware of business concerns about new paperwork needed for trade and we are monitoring developing issues, including any new calls on port towns and regulatory services. We have called for reforms of repatriated procurement and state-aid laws to allow local flex to help local economies.

Planning Reform – Government's response to the White Paper consultation is expected in Spring, with new legislation in Autumn.

Capacity - The [January LGA workforce survey](#) found that:

- 89% of councils reported they had about the right amount of PPE. 83% said all the staff who need testing can access it.
- 45% of councils are likely to be recruiting additional staff primarily for the COVID response.
- 38% of councils are considering hiring more apprentices in the next financial year.