

Safer and Stronger Communities Board overview and policy priorities 2023/24

Purpose of Report

For direction.

Summary

This paper provides an overview of the issues the board has focused on in recent years, alongside proposals for the Safer and Stronger Communities Board's (SSCB) work programme for 2023/24. The proposals are based on corporate LGA priorities and proposals for broader work based on a continuation of ongoing work (including responding to recent policy announcements by Government) and areas of interest previously indicated by board members.

LGA Plan Theme: Championing climate change and local environments

Recommendation(s)

That the Board agree the priorities and work programme set out in Appendix 1 to the report, subject to any agreed amendments.

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Background

1. At the first meeting of the Safer and Stronger Communities Board (SSCB), members are asked to consider the policy priorities for the work programme for the coming year.
2. This paper provides an overview of the current status of the key issues that the Board's work programme has focused on in recent years, along with the proposed high-level priorities for each of the key thematic work areas for the Board for 2023/24. The work programme takes account of feedback and suggestions provided by Board members.
3. The LGA's 2022-25 business plan identifies four main themes to the LGA's work in promoting local government:
 - 3.1. a sustainable financial future
 - 3.2. stronger local economies, thriving local democracy
 - 3.3. putting people first
 - 3.4. championing climate change and local environments.
4. Within these priorities are a number of particular relevance to the work of the Board:
 - 4.1. Continue to highlight the cost pressures on all council services and press for longer term funding that reflects current and future demand for services.
 - 4.2. Councils and combined authorities have the powers and resources to create the conditions for strong, inclusive local economies and good jobs as part of 'levelling up' the country.
 - 4.3. Local government has a key role in reducing socioeconomic inequality by increasing opportunity, strengthening communities and safety nets, and promoting long-term financial inclusion and resilience.
 - 4.4. Councils deliver democratic systems that everyone can engage with, including fair and safe elections and transparent and well-run governance arrangements.
 - 4.5. Councillors engage in healthy and positive debate and display the highest standards of conduct; abuse and intimidation of councillors and officers is taken seriously by all agencies and appropriate steps are taken to prevent and respond when it occurs.
 - 4.6. Councils have the appropriate leverage to enable them to deliver their public health and health protection responsibilities.
 - 4.7. Everyone wants to live in a green and safe local environment. Councils are actively working to address climate change whilst continuing to consider the broader environmental factors which help to make safer more sustainable communities.
5. The Board's work will also reflect the LGA's role in improving and supporting local government as set out in the business plan, in particular through:
 - Provision of Leadership Essentials events
 - Contribution to cross-board work on workforce issues
6. In addition to the themes mentioned above, the Plan adds that the LGA will 'continue to respond to unplanned immediate issues that impact on the sector' such as Grenfell.

7. It is proposed that the SSCB work programme should focus on the following six areas of activity:
 - 7.1. Community safety
 - 7.2. Prevent, counter extremism and cohesion
 - 7.3. Regulatory services and licensing
 - 7.4. Blue light services and civil resilience
 - 7.5. Crematoria, funerals, coroners and registrars
 - 7.6. Voluntary, community and social enterprise
8. The following sections of this report summarise the position in these six areas of activity, while annex one lists details of the proposed work programme for 2023/24.

Community safety

9. Our community safety workstream, incorporates a wide range of issues including anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and violence against women and girls and wider serious violence and crime issues, including modern slavery and organised crime. This is an always busy workstream, with several pieces of related legislation brought to Parliament in recent years. The team has also undertaken extensive reactive and proactive work responding to various legislative developments and government initiatives on a range of different community safety issues.
10. Officers have analysed the community safety strategies of 48 community safety partnerships (CSPs) to gauge which issues CSPs are currently prioritising. The 48 CSPs analysed were roughly representative of English councils by authority type, geography and political control. Their priorities are set out in Appendix 2. This suggests that the LGA's existing community safety work is broadly aligned with councils' priorities. The obvious gap in our existing work programme is around substance abuse. The Community Wellbeing Board work focuses around reducing the demand for drugs, while at its last meeting the Board agreed its focus should be on perspective should be reducing crime on the streets, (targeting drug dealers rather than drug users for example) as opposed to public health.

Counter-terrorism, counter-extremism and cohesion

11. This element of the Board's work covers counter-terrorism, including councils' role in delivering elements of the national counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, principally, Prevent (stopping people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism) and Protect (ensuring infrastructure and public places are less vulnerable to attack) – alongside wider efforts to tackle extremism, hate crime and build community cohesion and resilience. These can be particularly sensitive areas of work, and present a range of cross-cutting issues for local government.
12. The Government published its [refreshed counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST](#), in July 2023, setting out the national threat picture. Alongside the latest Prevent statistics (to year end March 2022), the primary domestic threats continue to come from Islamist terrorism/extremism and the extreme right-wing. The CONTEST strategy also notes that conspiracy theories can act as gateways to radicalised thinking and violence, with

common themes including religious or ethnic superiority, anti-Semitism, misogyny, anti-establishment and anti-LGBT grievances, and that individuals increasingly adopt a mix of ideas from different ideologies into their grievance narratives.

13. An Independent Review of Prevent (IRP) and [the Government's response to it, were published in February 2023](#). The Government accepted all the report's recommendations, almost all of which were of relevance to local authorities, and the Home Office has been working to implement the recommendations since the Spring, including the [recent publication of new statutory guidance for specified authorities](#) (including councils) which is expected to come into force at the end of December. Government has committed to reporting on progress with implementation within 12 months.
14. Legislation on a new Protect duty was announced as part of the Queen's speech in May 2022, and in May this year the Government published a [Terrorism \(Protection of premises\) draft Bill](#), known as Martyn's Law. The Bill proposes introducing a new duty for those responsible for certain publicly accessible premises and events to take measures to review and mitigate against terrorist activity. [The HASC published its report on the draft legislation](#) in July, which reflected our concerns, and concluded there was insufficient clarity about the overall objectives of the Bill.
15. Much of our work to support councils in response to and anticipation of future extremism and cohesion issues has been coordinated in partnership with the [Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism](#) (SIGCE). This LGA-funded programme has been developed to reflect sector need.
16. The LGA responded to [Dame Sara Khan's 2022 call for evidence on community cohesion](#), and we are expecting recommendations to be made to Government over the coming months.

Blue light services, civil resilience and water safety

Resilience

17. We expect to expand our work on resilience this year in response to Emerging lessons from Manchester Arena, Grenfell and Covid inquiries; ongoing national debates around resilience and the balance between community resilience and societal resilience; and the setting up of eight resilience pilots by DLUHC in Northumbria, Cumbria, Greater Manchester; Gloucestershire; London; West Mercia; Suffolk and Thames Valley

Blue light services

18. We are still awaiting the publication of the Government's response to the Fire Reform White paper. The White Paper contained three main themes: People, Professionalism and Governance, all of which have informed, and will continue to inform, the work of the Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC). For the forthcoming year it is expected that the Committee will also look more explicitly at culture within the fire and rescue service, following the publication of the Inspectorate's spotlight report into values and culture within the sector, and a number of media stories. Sector led improvement continues to be a priority for the FSMC and we are exploring ways in which to support the sector.

19. Climate change will continue to be of significance to the FSMC. Though the number of wildfires was decreased from last year the challenges posed to the fire sector by extreme weather continue to exist. The LGA will continue to work across the Boards to coordinate activity around climate change.
20. The FSMC meets on 6 October and will agree its priorities at that meeting following discussions with the Fire Commission on 22 September.

Water safety

21. On water safety, we will continue to raise awareness of water safety issues amongst councils and share good practice. We will also support the annual world drowning prevention day campaign.

Regulatory services and licensing

22. The Gambling Act Review White Paper was published in 2023 and contained a number of proposals of interest to councils. Of particular interest was the proposal to enable councils to introduce cumulative impact areas to limit the growth of new gambling premises in areas where there are already clusters. This change requires primary legislation, and we will call on Government to introduce these changes as soon as possible.
23. On taxi and private hire vehicle (PHV) licensing, the LGA has for many years called for a comprehensive reform Bill to modernise outdated legislation which hasn't kept pace with developments in the taxi and PHV market. Although the government is in theory committed to introducing a reform bill when Parliamentary time allows, there has to date been no indication that this is likely to happen. Of immediate concern is the fact that the Levelling Up White Paper contained a proposal to consult on transferring control of taxi and PHV licensing to both combined authorities and upper-tier authorities, something SSCB indicated it was firmly opposed to. We will continue to engage with officials at the Department for Transport on their plans for bringing forward this consultation and will respond when it is published.
24. We will continue to engage in a number of initiatives to reduce/avoid burdens falling on councils and improve licensing systems, including our long standing asks for a public health objective and localised licensing fees and managing burdens around any new local authority led licensing regime for cosmetic procedures.
25. Councillor licensing training has been a priority following a House of Lords select committee report that was critical of the operation and decisions of some licensing committees and called for a more consistent approach (as well as to merge planning and licensing committees, although the Government rejected this). During the previous Board cycle, LGA officers developed a new licensing e-learning module and licensing scenario videos to support training, and we will shortly launch a joint licensing committee member training standard alongside the Institute of Licensing to encourage members to use available training materials and demonstrate best practice. We will also run a further licensing leadership essentials course in this Board cycle.
26. The LGA has been warning for several years of the risks to wider regulatory services capacity (specifically environmental health and trading standards) arising from cuts to

local government funding. The prominent role these services played during Covid helped highlight this within Government, although disappointingly the recommendations of the its task and finish group on regulatory services (including for dedicated apprenticeship funding) were not taken forward. LGA and other survey data continues to highlight the challenges in recruiting skilled professionals, as well as the limited pipeline of officers coming through. Environmental Health has been identified by an LGAS-wide workforce capacity project as one of eight local service areas facing the most severe workforce issues and officers are engaged in the LGA's work to highlight this issue. We are continuing to engage with the LGA workforce team and relevant professional bodies to highlight the risks of this issue and need for central funding, as well as to identify what steps councils can take to try to mitigate the issues themselves.

Crematoria, funerals, coroners and registrars

27. The Law Commission is currently in the scoping phase for a project titled 'A Modern Framework for Disposing of the Dead'. The Law Commission states that the legislation governing traditional methods of disposal is "outdated, piecemeal and complex." The scoping phase will consider what issues they will need to cover in the project and terms of reference will be agreed with the Government. The project will seek to create a future-proof legal framework for the disposal of the dead. It is expected that the project will look at the law around burial, cremation, new methods of disposal, and decision-making following death. We will engage with the project as it touches on many issues of interest to councils.
28. We are currently undertaking a survey on public health funerals to inform further work on issues associated with these funerals.
29. We will continue to respond to issues in the media as they arise.

Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise

30. We will be working in partnership with the National Council of Voluntary Organisations to develop a playbook for local government commissioning and procurement teams who work with Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) partners to reflect the changed environment and opportunities after the passage of the Procurement Bill.
31. We aim to develop a good practice guide to support councils in working with VCSE infrastructure organisations to empower smaller and grass-roots VCSE organisations.

Legislation and parliamentary work

32. We will continue our engagement with relevant select committee inquiries as they are announced and with All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) who are active on safer communities issues. We will also seek to lobby around any relevant Bills within the King's Speech due on 7 November.

Conferences, events and media

33. The team will continue its work with the media team to produce a wide variety of media content, reflecting both our key lobbying objectives and the newsworthy issues council's protective services deal with.

Implications for Wales

34. We will work with colleagues at the Welsh LGA to identify areas where our work will be applicable to Wales in terms of non-devolved issues. Where work relates to devolved issues our focus will be on English authorities, with the WLGA leading on work in Wales, but we will share our work with WLGA should they wish to use it as a basis for Welsh specific work of their own.

Financial Implications

35. The work priorities identified for 2023/24 will be delivered within the planned staffing budget, which includes dedicated capacity to support work on cohesion, extremism and Prevent.
36. Additional supporting projects may be commissioned subject to funds being available from a small directorate / team budget.

Equalities implications

37. All board papers are now required to outline the equalities implications of the proposals they put forward, to help embed the equalities approaches the LGA's members are also considering.
38. Officers will therefore consider the equalities aspects of individual elements of the work programme as these are developed. Board members are also encouraged to consider this as an issue they may wish to scrutinise.

Next steps

39. Officers to take forward the work programme as approved by the board, reporting on progress at regular intervals through lead members' meetings and board updates.