COPING WITH THE CUTS
SPECIAL FEATURES

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CORRECTION Council leaders: our table of election results should have identified the leader of Tameside as Councillor Kieran Quinn and the leader of Tower Hamlets as Councillor Helal Abbas
In this issue of c’llr

Who’s that on the cover, you’re thinking. Where’s our usual friendly councillor? Well, unusual times call for unusual measures and as much of this issue is driven by the budget, we thought we’d put the architect right upfront.

There are arguments for big cuts now and arguments against. But the man with the battered briefcase on the cover is the one whose view prevails. That’s why we’ve devoted much of this issue to the cuts: what they’ll mean and how to manage them as well as supportive voices and voices with alternative views.

While councillors are grappling with delivering cuts and looking for new ways of working, workers across the public sector are worrying about their own jobs. And they are facing uncertain futures in the face of shameless newspapers that talk about faceless bureaucrats and pen-pushers doing non-jobs and looking forward to gold-plated pensions. Parts of the media like nothing better than a witch-hunt: how soon they moved on from the bankers and their bonuses. So, the c’llr plea to all readers is to remind the public that the people who work in the public sector are for the most part hard-working and dedicated people. And for those of you with the unenviable task of doing away with people’s jobs, please remember they are victims of the crisis not the cause of it.

The attacks on the staff have meant there’s been a bit less attention paid to councillors. But expect that to change, at least locally, when unpopular decisions are made. Janet Sillett looks at some of the decisions that will need to be taken and Ashley Wilcox gives some advice on how to deal with the media in a time of cuts.

It will be a stressful time for councillors – an even more stressful time. Sir Jeremy Beecham tells us how the pressures of being the leader of Newcastle led to sleepless nights and caused him to ‘crash’; Carla Butler put her career on hold so she could be a good councillor. The thanks she got from one constituent was abuse – given under the mistaken impression that Carla was paid handsomely for opening an event as mayor. She wasn’t paid, of course, and was giving her time free. Carla, c’llr’s young councillor of the year has decided to stand down because she needs to earn a living.

REALITY CHECK

Regular users of the London Underground will recognise the phrase. But with severe spending cuts in the offing it’s a message that local authorities must heed.

In my ward the PCT recently proposed to cut its support for welfare rights officers located in GP surgeries. The suggestion was cost driven. No one doubted the effectiveness of the provision.

In the last year, a staff member working the equivalent of one day a week has secured £1.3m in additional benefits for patients and has dealt with problem debt amounting to more than £1.2m.

The local GPs are positive about the impact. It doesn’t need a wizard to work out that a patient with money problems suffering from depression might benefit more from financial advice rather than cognitive behavioural therapy.

That the service is situated in the GPs’ surgeries may surprise some people. The advantage of location at the health centre is that some people will act on doctor’s orders while refusing to accept advice from other sources or be seen attending benefits offices or going to the one-stop-shop.

Originally, the County Council funded the service on a pilot basis. A year later provision was extended and the PCT accepted funding responsibility, based on evidence of its effectiveness and support from GPs.

And that’s where the ‘mind the gap’ warning becomes pertinent. The creativity that characterises times of relative prosperity differs from that which prevails in a climate of cuts.

Faced with tight budgets, the non-statutory low-hanging fruit is likely to be the first to go particularly where, as in this case, the member of staff is a part-time female employed on a temporary basis by the CAB.

Fortunately, I’m pleased to report that lobbying has led to an extension of the service for a further six months. If this isn’t a front line service, then I’m at loss to know what is. Whether it can be sustained is another matter.

Watch this space.

Dave Wilcox is chair of the LGiU
Councillors and the Big Society

Where do the 20,000 elected local councillors fit into David Cameron’s Big Society ideas? The LGiU argues that they have a vital role.

The Big Society sounds a bit like Hazel Blears empowerment agenda. The difference though is that Blears thought that central government could create empowered communities, through funding streams, guidance, networks and by placing a statutory ‘duty to involve’ on councils. In contrast, the new coalition believes that the Big Society will develop if the government gets out of the way, and that as the state – local and central – withdraws from people’s lives, this will be a stimulus for more community action.

The LGiU believes that councils, and particularly elected members, have a big role to play in the Big Society. Councillors can help to galvanise the community, access resources, influence local partners and create new partnerships. Crucially, with their democratic mandate, councillors can help to balance competing interests within communities, to make sure that the Big Society is working for all. For example, where there are competing claims from citizens or community organisations to take over the ownership of an asset or the running of a service, councillors must play an important role, in dialogue with their community, about the best approach.

In a more formal sense, councillors are the right people to consider issues, and make interventions where appropriate, around such things as the use of public money and assets, service standards and inclusion. The Big Society will be challenging for councillors, it may mean learning new ways of working and new skills, but most of all you will be asked to develop it in a tough context of service reductions. The LGiU is working now on how we can support elected members to develop their roles as community organisers. While this may mean abandoning the traditional view of public service, as the only mandated community representative in your ward, it could ultimately be a much fuller and rewarding task, acting as an arbiter and a catalyst for your community. We will be seeking your views.

FORWaRD lOOk

Budget calls for innovation

Councillor Robert-John Tasker argues the Budget gives the British people an opportunity to change the relationship between people and state and to help forge a realignment of attitudes.

What has be come clear to the Coalition is that shrinking the size of the state is of paramount importance in tackling the country’s huge deficit and social problems, leading to transition towards a private sector economy. Local government has to accept it is going to have to play a far less prominent role in people’s lives and will need to develop more innovative, creative and essential methods to deliver services.

The Chancellor will cut 25 per cent from government budgets over the coming term, which inevitably will mean large-scale redundancies. While this will seem a precarious time for public sector workers, under Labour, the size of government had reached eye-watering levels; more than seven million are receiving their income from the government, council tax levels have rocketed, and £4.8bn of child benefit goes to above-average income households. During the Blair years, government spending hovered either side of 40 per cent of GDP. The mismanagement of public finances over the last 13 years is clear for all to see.

However, part of tackling our country’s parlous economic state is to radically reform local government while maintaining its raison d’être. The cutting of local government quangos, funding agencies, diversity and media portfolios, the streamlining of ring-fenced budgets and reining back on travel and entertainment are essential. The sale of council assets to private enterprise and generally shrinking the size of town hall has to be a priority for any forward thinking leader of a local authority. The age-old attitude of increasing taxation because of the town hall’s inability to make real cuts and failure to pioneer efficiency has to cease and a more entrepreneurial and corporate approach to providing services needs to prevail.

Part of the new attitude in local government has to be directed towards housing. Housing takes up £7.3bn of the overall local government budget. Cuts to social housing are estimated at £750m. Local authorities must encourage and entice people into private ownership through shared ownership schemes, building closer relationships with corporate housing partners and promoting the building of new family homes on brownfield sites.

Other important areas for consideration include libraries, leisure centres and other public amenities. Sensible realignment of those services, so important to local residents, can be used to create vast community hubs. Scaling back and allowing voluntary organisations and local people to take charge of these services is another way of ensuring the role of local government is reduced, the empowerment of individuals is increased, and service provision is maintained.

During tough and challenging times residents and citizens need to take responsibility for their communities as well as each other rather than leaving it to anonymous paid officials. If David Cameron’s Big Society idea is to work, then reintroducing the spirit of serving one’s country can form the backbone for the most phenomenal and radical shake up of how we live, work and make decisions. The question is: Are people ready and prepared to carry the burden of responsibility that is sorely needed?
is for balanced councils. It isn’t, obviously, but it’s the term Lib Dems prefer to hung councils. Were this column to follow their lead, it couldn’t record the party’s historic by-election victory on 1 July that turned previously Conservative Mendip DC into England’s 73rd hung (or balanced) council. Which, considering the dire electoral fates widely predicted for the junior national coalition partner, would have been sad.

Now, some real history. We recently remembered the 50th anniversary of the death of Monmouthshire’s most famous county councillor; also Ebbw Vale MP, Health Minister, and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. Yes, Aneurin Bevan, architect of the NHS, and H is for health, hospitals, and for the holistic health service we might have had, if Bevan – and his successors – hadn’t insisted on its nationalisation, rather than municipalisation.

In 1945 the widespread assumption was that local government, having run public health, hospitals and personal health services for decades, would also administer the new comprehensive NHS. The wartime coalition’s white paper agreed, plus most of Labour’s cabinet. Bevan, though, was unshakeable: at that time it was just not feasible.

The medical profession was opposed, but local government’s unreformed structure was the real hurdle. Fewer, larger, probably unitary authorities were needed, and, as minister also for local government, Bevan knew that couldn’t happen before the NHS was launched jointly with Beveridge’s insurance reforms in 1948.

He also knew his tripartite structure – hospitals, GPs and community services – was no long-term solution and should, when circumstances permitted, be unified and returned to a reformed local government. He would surely have raged at the opportunity lost in the ill-fated managerial reorganisation of 1974.

I was reminded of these events by a recent Radio 4 Today item that produced what regular listeners will recognise as a classic – in fact, several.

Presenter John Humphrys was interviewing Sam Etherington, a GP in an apparently excellent Tower Hamlets integrated health centre. Etherington explained how the best way to improve many of his patients’ health was to assist them to get back to work. “But that’s not your job”, harrumphed Humphrys, as he did at every other mention of a preventive health facility – language courses, arts, pottery and sculpture studios, healthy play spaces.

I wondered: if the NHS had become the LGHS, could an intelligent man have gone through his whole life without once encountering the practice of integrated care? I think not.
The last few months following the local and general elections have been an exciting and busy time at the LGiU. We have been in constant touch with the new coalition government and our local authority members and partner organisations about the changing policy landscape. As ever our job is to inform, innovate and influence policy and practice from a localist perspective. One of the key ways in which we do this is through our briefings and information services and I hope that readers of cllr are all signed up to receive these and that you found our regular updates useful. I took lots of calls from councillors and officers wanting to find out more, and I visited councils to talk with officers and members about the current changes, and how they might respond, particularly of course focusing on the tough financial context. Issues raised include the future of procurement, in my discussions with Westminster Council, and education issues such as Academies and Building Schools for the Future during my visit to Waltham Forest. Other members of the LGiU team have also been out and about working with councils and our partners.

The highlight of the past few months was the LGiU’s Annual Local Government Reception in Parliament in June. Eric Pickles gave his first public speech as Secretary of State, promising that the coalition’s priorities would be “Localism, Localism, and Localism, but not necessarily in that order.” A former officer of the All Party Group on Local Government and Leader of Bradford, Eric is someone who understands the realities faced by local government and I look forward to working with him over the next few years.

I attended the first AGM of the new All Party Parliamentary Group on Local Government, which the LGiU administers. The new chair of the group is former leader of South Derbyshire and former LGiU board member Heather Wheeler, now elected as the Member of Parliament for South Derbyshire. The group’s work will be increasingly important as the new government sets in motion its programme of cuts in public spending, combined with pressing societal challenges.

LGiU attended the LGA conference in Bournemouth in force, jointly holding round table events with BT, Swindon Council, Riverside, Natural England, and Hampshire County Council. We launched the Green Councils Taskforce, chaired by Councillor Ken Thornber, which will be lobbying Westminster and Whitehall to take account of local government’s role in improving the natural environment. The Taskforce’s first meeting was attended by the Leader of Cardiff, Cabinet Members for Environment from Kent, Liverpool and Manchester, and Cllr Robert Light from the LGA Executive.

We hosted a very successful joint dinner with BT attended by over 50 leaders and chief executives, and saw the launch of our new pamphlet ‘People Places Power: How Localism and Strategic Planning can work Together’ which explores some of the tensions between budgetary pressures, the need for clear leadership and strategic planning, arguing that resolving these issues will be the key challenge for local government over the next few years.

Finally, after a well-deserved summer holiday we will be picking up the momentum in September as I go around the country to hear from councils about innovative work and best practice during difficult times. We will also be diving into Party Conference season with our partners the NCVO and the ABI. You will shortly receive notice of our fringe events on flooding and community assets and an invitation to our conference dinner, and I look forward to seeing you all there.
More rubbish in the media

David Brindle finds that bin collections – or lack of them – still make good headlines, whatever the evidence says.

If an Englishman’s home is his castle, the weekly dustbin collection must be his feudal due. Or so you would think from the fury with which certain national newspapers have railed against the “fortnightly” collection and their delight at the move by communities secretary Eric Pickles to try to squash it.

The minister’s instruction to the Audit Commission to withdraw guidance (which it said it hadn’t issued) on recycling – seen as a prompt for councils to introduce recyclable and general waste collection on alternate weeks – was “a victory for the Daily Mail’s campaign to maintain weekly bin rounds”, declared the Mail. It was, said the Daily Express, “the first step towards the return of traditional bin rounds”.

Salvation came after the media contrived to link the growing number of urban foxes with the spread of so-called fortnightly collections, in the wake of the attack by foxes on twin babies in south London. This piled further damning testimony on top of well-worn accusations that maggots, wasps, rats, mice, squirrels and all manner of undesirables have been flourishing in the conditions created by variance of the weekly bin round.

In fact, as the Guardian’s Bad Science columnist Ben Goldacre has sought to show, the evidence base for this is less than solid. One particular piece of survey research, widely quoted since it was issued by an insurance company two years ago, proved impenetrable when he sought to analyse it. Yet thanks to the internet, the research enjoys eternal life and keeps on yielding dividends for the insurer and its publicity agency, Mischief PR.

The media’s approach can be rather more rational away from what we used to call Fleet Street. While “Save our Bin Round” appears to have much of the same knee-jerk appeal to some editors as “Save our A&E”, others clearly take a less hysterical view.

In Cambridge, where the council moved to alternate weekly collections in 2005, the issue barely registers in the local press. In Wiltshire, one of a number of councils still planning an alternate weekly system despite the national hoo-ha, the Salisbury Journal has reported the issues with balance and restraint. While giving voice to protestors and their too-good-to-miss quotes (“rats more than two feet long”), it has spelled out the environmental and cost case with clarity.

The same goes in Bolton, where the council is reintroducing alternate weekly collections for 1,700 hard-to-reach and rural homes with all-party support. The Bolton News, reassured that there are no proposals to bring back a borough-wide scheme axed in 2006 after a change of political control, has said the limited reintroduction is the only way of achieving recycling targets.

In Exeter, where 14,000 further households are poised to switch to alternate weekly collection, there may be no guarantee of no universal change but the council is working on the idea of seagull-proof refuse sacks. “Many people put their waste out at the correct time but find that it is attacked by seagulls,” cleansing services chief Mike Trim told the local Express & Echo. “This is a way of helping those residents.”

Perhaps the press is right to be fiercely protective of people’s right to a regular and vermin-free bin round. As a recent survey for the Local Government Association suggested, more of us (44%) regard rubbish collection as a frontline service than help for disabled people (43%) or child protection (40%).

Disturbing as this may seem, it surely reflects the fact that we all depend on an efficient refuse service. Which makes it a great story for media of every kind. Even the Jewish Chronicle has found an angle on the iniquity of “fortnightly” collections, discovering one Daniel Wolman who commissioned scientists at Tel Aviv University to analyse swabs from bins emptied only every two weeks. “They found that levels of potentially deadly bacteria, such as E. coli, increased by 600 per cent,” the JC reported.

Woolman’s interest? He is the inventor of Binifresh, a hygiene and odour control device for bins.

David Brindle is the Guardian’s public services editor.
TEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT... the Licensing Act 2003

Applications for licences often get the community knocking on its councillor’s door. In the first of our new series of handy guides for councillors on important legislation, Hilary Kitchin explains the essentials of the Licensing Act 2003.

1 Local authorities are licensing authorities for their area and must publish a three-yearly Statement of Licensing Policy which takes account of local interests and addresses the four licensing objectives.

2 Licensing committees are responsible for issuing licenses for the sale of alcohol. Committee decisions are quasi-judicial – that is they must follow the principles of natural justice and take account of any Human Rights issues. Routine decisions can be delegated to officers, but when representations are made there will normally be a hearing. The Committee receives monitoring reports on the operation of licences in the area.

3 Four licensing objectives must be taken into account when licensing is considered: • the prevention of crime and disorder • public safety • prevention of public nuisance • the protection of children from harm.

4 Licences will be needed for retail sale of alcohol, supply of alcohol in clubs, provision of late night refreshment, and plays, films, live music, and various other entertainments with an audience. A licence is valid for the life of the business. The application for a premises licence must set out the terms of operation which become the main conditions of the licence. A premises licence that includes sale of alcohol must name a designated premises supervisor who must hold a personal licence.

5 Flexible opening hours for licensed premises allow for up to 24 hour opening, seven days a week. The impact on local residents, businesses, and the expert opinion of a range of authorities in relation to the licensing objectives must be considered when granting a licence.

6 Interested parties: Local inspectorates, public authorities such as fire and children’s services, and the police all play a role in licensing applications and reviews. A wide group of ‘interested parties’ are able to make representations, appeals, and applications for reviews of licences, including neighbours and residents’ associations; businesses including charities, churches and medical practices; parish and town councils.

7 Elected councillors: Individual councillors can act as interested parties, representing particular groups or making representations in their own right. If they do so, they are not then able to make executive decisions on the issue and must disclose their interest when required by the Code of Conduct. Councillors can ask to be kept informed of licensing issues in their areas. Officers are entitled to draw a councillor’s attention to particular concerns about licensed premises.

8 Applications for licences: The Committee must take into account the four licensing objectives, and there will be a hearing should an interested party want to make representations on an application for a licence. The Committee can make one of five decisions: to grant the licence with conditions that match the operating schedule (conditions can be added); to exclude some licensable activities from the application; to refuse to accept the person specified as designated premises supervisor (on police advice); to approve different parts of the premises for different activities; or to reject the application entirely.

9 Appeals and challenges: An unsuccessful applicant for a licence can appeal to the local magistrates’ court. Third parties can appeal against a council’s decision to grant a licence. An interested party can also apply to the licensing authority for a review of an existing licence, to make the case that its conditions should be amended, or that it be revoked entirely.

10 Temporary event notices: An event organiser can serve a temporary event notice (TEN) to serve alcohol for up to 96 hours at events which will involve fewer than 500 people, such as an open weekend in a pub, a beer tent at a summer fair, or club activity. Notices must be submitted at least ten working days beforehand on the council and police: police have 48 hours make an objection on grounds of crime prevention. If there is evidence that the limits will be exceeded, or a police objection is upheld, the council will issue a counter-notice cancelling the TEN.

Coalition government plans:
Local authorities and the police will have stronger powers to remove licences from, or refuse to grant licences to, premises that are causing problems. Councils and the police will be given the power to permanently shut down shops or bars found to be persistently selling alcohol to children. There is no commitment to ban 24-hour drinking, but councils will be permitted to charge more for late-night licences to pay for additional policing. Look out for the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill referred to in the Queen’s speech.

The end of a capital idea

The phrase ‘hotter than July’ took on a new meaning when the coalition government chose that very month to unleash the most dramatic public spending squeeze the country has seen for over a generation. And as we soon found out, the school building programme was in the firing line, writes Jasmine Ali.

The decision to freeze the £55 billion programme to rebuild hundreds of dilapidated schools sent shock waves through hundreds of local authorities. Of course it was no secret that Secretary of State Michael Gove had been reviewing Labour’s Building Schools for the Future scheme since long before the election. It concluded that all local authority schemes that have not reached financial close would be cancelled, “saving billions of pounds”.

Gove used the eve of the LGA annual conference in Bournemouth to release a list of local authorities that would be affected. Councillors of every political persuasion were up in arms at the prospect of having to close projects, cancel contracts and explain the logic of this to their communities. This mood was soon aggravated – his list of affected local authorities was wrong. And the timing was impeccable; Gove was down to do the closing speech at the end of a three day conference.

Calling off the rebuild of 715 schools across the country will be a massive challenge for local leaders as they face the anger of their schools and communities

When Gove took to the podium in Bournemouth, I was at the other end of the country, in Manchester listening to the Children’s Commissioner Maggie Atkinson address the ADCS conference.

Maggie used her speech to inform us that she was “agnostic on the different types of schools on offer”, but added a wise message to Gove that “things are never that simple.” And even as she spoke, to a relatively sanguine audience of Directors of Children’s Services, thanks to Twitter I can tell you the audience for Michael Gove was less patient. The first tweet read “Welease Woger”. For those of you not old enough to remember Monty Python, this was a cruel allusion to a famous scene in which an upper class Roman Patrician loses control of a crowd of increasingly cynical Plebeians...

Gove told the conference that he wanted to change the way capital is allocated because the “old BSF way shut out local communities, was insufficient of the expertise you have and was wasteful of the limited resources you have at your disposal”.

But he couldn’t get away from the bald facts. Calling off the rebuild of 715 schools across the country – not to mention the hundreds of others that have not even come near to putting forward their cases for BSF funding – will be a massive challenge for local leaders as they face the anger of their schools and communities. Those schools fortunate enough to have received and spent BSF funding must feel a strong sense of relief. But those who have not will face the crushing reality of working with outdated and inadequate facilities. Liverpool is a case in point - many of its schools are located in some of the country’s most deprived wards, yet they will be hardest hit by the new perspective.

Many local authorities are considering legal advice over the scrapping of their BSF programmes – Sandwell MBC and Nottingham City Council were both hit by the cuts after the confusion of the policy announcement. Wigan and Bolton are also seeking compensation from the government.

Shadow education secretary Ed Balls says the reversal of his flagship policy is a “tragedy” for teachers and parents who would have benefited from the new facilities. He says Labour will fight to “save our new schools”.

The BSF crisis is an early exemplar of the values and programme of the new coalition government. Its powerful Big Society programme aims to unleash a newly defined localism which can engage communities without ‘big government’. To be fair Michael Gove had a strong start as one of the few ministers to have legislation ready in time for the Queen’s Speech.

But if this is localism, localities have the right to ask: is the public really satisfied that the cuts programme will not impact the front-line? Because that’s what most of them voted for.
Child Poverty – will it end?

Catherine Heffernan highlights the links between child poverty and poor health – and a range of other problems that can blight their lives and harm society in general.

Across the UK, children are put to bed each night with a favourite bedtime story. Some may listen to Dick Whittington and dream of London where the streets are paved with gold. The adults telling the story will be acutely aware of the duality of London. It is the city of opportunity, higher wages and standards of living but also the city of higher housing, childcare and living costs. Sadly, for four out of ten children living in London, they will only see the hardship.

More than 600,000 children live in poverty in this nation’s capital. You may be surprised to think that a western country in the 21st century could still have poverty. Yet 22.5 per cent of children in the UK live in poor households. Furthermore, the gap between the rich and the poor has been increasing over the past 20 years and now with the recession and the current cost-cutting climate, it is only going to get worse.

Child poverty is defined as growing up in a low income household. There are a number of different measures of poverty from ‘relative low income’ (the proportion of children living in families in receipt of out of work benefits or tax credits where their reported income is less than 60 per cent median income) to ‘persistent poverty’ (children who have lived in relative low income for at least three of the last four years).

The impact on health is enormous. First, child poverty can lead to lower skills and aspirations, poorer education and unemployment for future generations. These are linked to higher likelihood of smoking, alcohol consumption and substance misuse, poor physical activity and unhealthy eating. The end results are higher risk of disease and ill health such as cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and poor mental health.

Second, children living in poverty suffer an immediate impact. They are affected by cold and damp housing, lack of access to sufficient food, lack of green spaces, lack of safe-play areas, lack of access to public services and amenities and exposure to pollutants. These can lead to a higher likelihood of childhood accidents, malnutrition, obesity, respiratory diseases, behavioural problems and increased risk of infection.

Third, while a child’s life course is affected as a whole, they are also subjected to psycho-social effects in childhood. This can include parental depression, debt, low self-esteem, family conflict, domestic violence, crime and a lack of adequate parenting skills or supervision. There is evidence supporting the link between the immediate effects of child poverty and ASBOS, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, dating violence and alcohol and drug misuse among young people.

So what can we do to reduce child poverty? There is a draft interim guidance for local duties on child poverty (Child Poverty bill 2009) which is expected to be issued on a statutory basis in 2010. Local authorities in conjunction with their named local partners (for example, NHS) will be obliged to prepare and publish a joint child poverty strategy which is rooted in a local child poverty needs assessment. They will then be expected to implement and mitigate the effects of child poverty in their area. Some local authorities have already started the process.

Fourteen London boroughs have signed up to the London Child Poverty Pledge with 11 reducing child poverty as a priority within their Local Area Agreement. Others are busy with the current 25 per cent cost cutting. But child poverty remains and sadly, it is increasing.

Steps to Reduce Child Poverty:
- Take responsibility and raise awareness about child poverty in your area
- Identify the ‘hot spots’ and map access to facilities, healthy foods, levels of homelessness as well as health indicators such as tooth decay, obesity and immunisation uptake. Know who and where is living in child poverty.
- Engage partners – think health, education, housing, voluntary sector and social services
- Improve education and children’s chances.
- Think family and think parents – work at improving employment and parenting skills, providing information for parents on services available to them and providing affordable childcare
- Improve access to information for vulnerable people for example, income maximisation, debt advice, counselling and family therapy, adult education and emergency practical support.
- Remember you are investing to save. Improving outcomes for children means reducing the £12 billion child poverty costs the public sector.
Five ways to fight obesity

While the impact of bulimic super-models on young girls’ self esteem occupies a gargantuan portion of media focus, Dave Wilcox is looking through the other end of the telescope – at portliness.

There’s nothing new about it. Our 18th century monarch, Queen Anne was so stout she couldn’t climb stairs. She had a trap door put in the ceiling of Windsor Castle so she could be hoisted into the state rooms below and when she died her coffin was almost square.

But the issue nowadays is not the gluttony of the few but the swelling midriffs of the many and particularly an acceleration in the incidence of child obesity.

It’s primarily a western phenomenon, but as a regular observer of the street scene in China over the last couple of decades, I can confirm that the plumpness of young Chinese people suggests that obesity is likely to be a global characteristic of the 21st century.

The US gives us particular cause for concern in this direction. Earlier this year, one of our staff in Derbyshire was there and was asked how many chicken nuggets she wanted in her order. Up to 50 (yes fifty) was standard, but she could go for a larger portion for a small premium.

Around Easter this year, the International Herald Tribune reported that America was facing a supply crisis in chicken wings. Shortages meant that prices had risen by 50 per cent. Imaginative entrepreneurs had invented “boneless” chicken wings, made from chicken breast meat, which seemed popular with customers and were helping retailers hold up sales.

About the same time Continental Airlines Magazine gave its readers five big reasons to visit Texas. One was: “If its steak your hankering for, you might try the Big Texan in Amarillo where you can have a 72 oz steak with all the fixings for free - if you can eat it all in an hour”.

It’s in that context that European, UK and local policies makers have somehow to stop us treading the American path. In the interests of brevity I’ve been sufficiently disciplined to limit my recommendations to five.

First, we have to keep the messages simple. One of the most successful health advertising campaigns in recent years has been five fruit and vegetables a day. If anyone asks you if chips or orange drinks count, the answer is “yes” but only as 6 and 7.

Second, we have to accept that if we’re brave we’ll upset food processors. As Professor Michael Pallan has suggested “If it comes from a plant eat it. If it was made in a plant, don’t”. Even better is his suggestion that if it’s advertised on TV leave it alone.

Third, ignore claims of those who’ve found the holy grail of weight loss. A classic recently was a Press Association announcement that “Giving people cash payments to shed pounds can lead to substantial weight loss, research suggests”. Poppycock! The research referred to an experiment by a South East of England PCT. They aren’t going to continue with it, not least because of 400 participants that began the trial, three-quarters had pulled out before the “results” were published.

Fourth, let’s lead by example. When council caterers come up with deep fried cod, chicken goujons or mayonnaise-lashed salads react. When biscuits are brought demand bananas. Even go so far as to be rude about food if you have to. Good food needs its ambassadors if we are to avert a crisis and create a future free from fatness for our younger people.

And finally, we might even offer free swimming to the under 16s in the area, but I realise that’s a wee bit provocative.
Douglas Carswell

Mark D’Arcy meets a Conservative MP with a radical agenda for local government and who sees the Lib Dems as a check against Tory centralist tendencies.

Douglas Carswell believes the moment for radical localist reform is here. Rather to the surprise of its members, he says, the Coalition is finding a startling amount of common ground over the need to transfer power away from the centre. Spurred on by the need to cut government spending, the Conservatives – once the most centralist party of the European right – are rediscovering the joys of decentralism, and finding that the Liberal Democrats have always believed in them. Quite unexpectedly, the government has reached an intellectual tipping point.

Carswell is worth listening to. He is that rarest of creatures – a backbench MP who has made a genuine difference to British politics. In the last Parliament, at the height of the expenses scandal, he raised the standard of revolt against Speaker Michael Martin, and in the process he attained a kind of guru status in the Tory blogosphere and attracted attention to the radical agenda he has worked out with his close ally, the Euro-MP Daniel Hannan.

His analysis runs like this: local government badly needs reform to allow local innovation to drive a revolution in the quality and cost of town hall services. Scrapping targets is only the start. “It’s odd that Conservatives understand that choice and competition are good in business, but have not been willing to let them flourish in local government,” he says.

But even 20 years on, Tories are still haunted by the Poll Tax fiasco – and they remain neuralgic about tinkering with local taxation. The arrival of Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems as partners in government provides, he says, a check against the Conservatives’ instinctive vice of centralism, and the drive to make a historic reform – real devolution of financial power.

Carswell argues that the current system provides no real link between the efficiency of a local authority and the tax it charges. Worse, it provides perverse incentives to inefficiency and high-spending, and cuts the ground from under Conservatives who should be the local apostles of efficiency and sound finance.

In the past, he and Hannan have argued for a local sales tax – now he suggests directing the revenue from fuel duties collected in a given area to local authorities would provide a buoyant, cheap to collect, revenue stream. At first, perhaps, councils would have no power to vary the duty, but that could be phased in. It would need to be supplemented with other taxes, but it would be simple tax, and highly visible to voters.

Ah! But what if councillors ran amok and imposed eye-watering local taxes? Carswell’s answer is simple. The voters would learn their lesson and vote the culprits out. Just as the high-spending ways of successive Democrat mayors of New York, led ultimately to the election of Rudi Giuliani, so, he believes, an outbreak of town hall tax and spend would engender a new generation of radical municipal Tories.

And in any event, he’s not proposing to leave local taxpayers without safeguards. There would be a right to veto council policies by referendum and more power of initiative to make sure that councils respond to grassroots concerns.

Carswell is adamant that his localism means not “all power to town halls,” but “power to the (local) people.” So he supports direct elections for Police Commissioners and the move to foundation schools – both policies which bypass local authorities. And he’s impressed by the Windsor and Maidenhead initiative to publish all items of council spending over £500 online, which, he says, encourages “crowdsourcing” of ideas to make local services more efficient. Westminster provides a painful example of just how effective such scrutiny can be, he says. “Look how much more responsive MPs have become about our expenses, since the detailed figures were published.”

Conservatives of his stamp, Carswell says, are discovering that they have more in common with many Liberal Democrats on decentralisation than with their more traditionalist Tory colleagues: “Given that the Lib Dems and [Conservative Decentralisation Minister] Greg Clark totally get it, and that Nick Clegg will want to leave a historic legacy, they have a real opportunity to transform the shape of local government.”

Mark D’Arcy is a Parliamentary Correspondent for BBC News. BBC.co.uk/blogs/markdarcy
Carla Butler won the c’l’lr young councillor of the year award. Judges praised her for her hard work and her efforts to get other young people involved in local democracy. So why’s she standing down next May? Alan Pickstock spoke to her to find out.

Elected aged 21, Carla Butler has already clocked up eight years as a councillor. She says she had an interest in politics since schooldays and got involved because she felt strongly about local issues. In particular she had concerns about the shortage of facilities for young people in her home town of Newhaven on the south coast. She also opposed plans to build an incinerator in the area.

Having shown an interest, she was co-opted to the town council, later standing for election and re-election. As if that wasn’t enough, she was also elected to Lewes District Council.

And, to add to an already impressive workload, four years into her life as a councillor she studied for a law degree. “Being a councillor made me want to understand the law better. I don’t think I would have done the degree if it hadn’t been for my experience on the council”.

Now, having graduated, she wants to pursue a legal career and realises that – particularly at the start of that journey – she doesn’t have the time for the councils and the career. “My careers advisor was stunned to know what I’ve done, but suggested that potential employers might be put off.”

Improving the lot of young people locally – and their involvement with local democracy – has been a theme of her time as a councillor. She created a young mayor’s project which resulted in an election for 11-17-year-olds for a young mayor.

And in July 2009, the young people of Newhaven voted for the first Young Mayor of Newhaven – 13 year-old Daly Tucknott. Daly’s opponent in the Young Mayor elections, 12yr old Chloe Leister, will be the Deputy Young Mayor.

Daly is fully signed up to a campaign that Carla says would be her greatest achievement as a councillor – getting the County Council to re-designate a local beach as a village green, forcing its private owners to re-open it for the public. The beach closed in 2008. The public inquiry into giving the West Beach village green status got underway as c’l’r went to press.

Her other work to engage young people includes regular visits to schools to explain how councils work. “I also tell them how much things cost. For example if you explain that to build a new play park costs as much as it does to build a house I think they respect it more and don’t take things for granted.”

“My careers advisor was stunned to know what I’ve done, but suggested that potential employers might be put off.”

But she has found that the MPs expenses scandal has had a knock-on effect to how some people view councillors. “As Mayor, I was opening an event recently and someone in the crowd made derogatory comments about how much I was getting for turning up. They didn’t know that like many councillors I give my time for nothing.”

But being active and visible as a young councillor may have helped blaze a trail for others. “When I was elected at 21, the next youngest councillor was 40. Since the last election, we’ve had six councillors under 30.

“My advice to new councillors would be to be realistic and be patient with the system; make the most of it and do as much as you can.

“At some time in the future I’d like to go back to being a councillor. It’s definitely a shame to have to leave it. I’ve loved doing it and I think I’ve helped a lot of young people along the way”.
Challenges for the Care Commission

In May the coalition government announced its intention to set up a Commission on the long-term funding of adult social care. Allan Bowman, Chair of the Social Care Institute for Excellence, reflects on some of the issues the Commission should consider.

Here at the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), the body charged with identifying and spreading good practice in social care, we welcomed the announcement of a funding Commission because a rapidly ageing population, rising public expectations and increasing numbers of disabled people all mean that the goal of a new consensus on the funding of adult care services is extremely important. To be effective, any funding solution needs to stand the test of time; hence the need for broad agreement on the way forward.

Although we await details of the composition and terms of reference of the Commission, anyone who has been involved in the recent discussions about the pressures facing adult social care knows that its biggest challenge will be ensuring that people can exercise choice over good quality services, provided within costs that we can all sustain. They will also look at how to share those costs equitably between individuals, families and the state. That’s where you come in.

Given the scale of the public expenditure restraint which faces us, there is now much discussion about cost efficiencies and effectiveness.

SCIE is playing a central role in pushing this agenda forward. However, we must not forget that, despite the arrival of “Austerity Britain”, a realistic goal must remain the provision of quality services. As councillors the roles you play are important because people want a ‘care and support’ package to achieve choice and control. Let’s look at an example.

One of the films on our Social Care TV channel shows how a woman with dementia, Marjorie Duffield, was having a difficult time in a residential setting. Staff at a new home made a breakthrough; they found out more about her past and before long she was reunited with a piano. It turns out that she was an accomplished player. The story ends with Marjorie going to see a concert; a remarkable turnaround that gave her and her family joy and dignity.

Although councils are no longer mainstream providers of care services, they remain heavily involved in the care and support of people like Marjorie; from commissioning innovative and quality services to providing transport and leisure facilities so that she could go to her concerts.

At SCIE we have been working to build an approach to assess services’ value-for-money. SCIE will share the evidence about what works and what offers best value for money, so that those who plan, deliver and use services are basing their choices on the best available knowledge. For those of us working in social care, the watch-words need to be ‘innovation’ and ‘improvement’, so that a reasonable price is paid for quality care and support.

As with Marjorie’s example, this also affects services such as housing, advocacy, transport, health, leisure, and financial services. These areas need to be fitted around people’s lives so that their care and wellbeing is addressed. While we at SCIE maintain that questions about who pays for long-term adult care are vital, we know that it is equally crucial to ensure that social care services are cost-effective, personalised and delivered by a well-supported, skilled workforce.

For those of us working in social care, the watch-words need to be ‘innovation’ and ‘improvement’, so that a reasonable price is paid for quality care and support.

While we’re waiting for the Long-Term Care Funding Commission to report, the work to deliver and improve care and support for frail and vulnerable people must continue. Encouragingly, a recent Local Government Association survey indicated the importance which many people place on care for older people. So we must not fall into a “slash and burn” mindset, but seek to do the best we can with the resources available.

SCIE can support this work. As well as Social Care TV, there are online resources such as SCIE’s Dementia Gateway and Dignity in Care guide. They are simple-to-use and they support staff in their day-to-day work.

I look forward to the Commission’s findings; the main message from SCIE to councils is “please don’t forget the quality.”

You can find out more about SCIE at www.scie.org.uk
The Law of Meetings’ published by G.A. Blackwell (4th Edition 1907) and dedicated to Lord Alverstone, a long forgotten Lord Chief Justice of England, is not, I suspect widely read today. I found a copy by chance, gathering dust in a charity shop. For the princely sum of 25p I purchased it because, having flicked through the preface (and knowing that I had been commissioned to write this article) I realised that it described, well over 100 years ago, some key principles of local government that haven’t really changed and which every councillor should be aware.

Blackwell explains ‘meetings’ as being of “two classes – (1) meetings convened by persons under no legal duty to hold such meetings for social, political, and other purposes; (2) meetings convened by corporate bodies under a legal duty to hold meetings in order to discharge their Statutory or Common Law duties”. Local Government, then as now operates in the second of these categories and not just with regard to meetings.

Local authorities are created by Acts of Parliament and are statutory bodies. So while the citizen is free to do anything that is not illegal, councils and councillors can only do what they are specifically permitted to do by law. This is a very important fact which every elected member, whether wet behind the ears or encrusted with years of service must never forget.

Just as, according to one author ‘men are from Mars and women are from Venus’, so councillors, once they take the oath of office are in a very different place to the people they represent. Time spent understanding the council’s procedures, protocols, regulations and codes of practice is time well spent.

To start with, learn how the council makes decisions and how you can influence these on behalf of the people you represent. This means developing a good knowledge of procedural standing orders. These specify the terms of reference for committees, timing of council meetings, the order of business, rules of debate and other matters of procedure. The roles of the Full Council, the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny committees interlock but at the same time have distinctive powers and responsibilities and it is important to understand the differences.

This is not all. Local authorities are not just service providers they also have regulatory duties. This involves councillors in quasi-judicial roles sitting on bodies appointed directly by the council, such as planning and licensing committees. Whereas the cut and thrust of partisan politics is expected, for example in full council – as a member of a regulatory committee councillors are required to act in a non-partisan, independent fashion and for this reason and in this context are not subject to the party whip.

In his book ‘The representation of self in every day life’ the American Sociologist, Ervin Goffmann remarked that we ‘act out’ many different and distinct roles each day depending on with whom we interact.

This is also true of councillors and not just in relation to their positions on the council. They will spend time with constituents (a very varied population); other elected members; sit on outside bodies; engage with different council officers – from community workers to the chief executive (and everything in between). Common sense and common courtesy will allow you to successfully negotiate most situations. However do pay close attention to the ‘Councillors Code of Conduct’ and the protocols governing member – officer relationships: common sense can only carry you so far.

Political advancement is frequently portrayed as driven by ideological cut and thrust and personal intrigue. There is also a more prosaic path to success: knowing the council’s Standing Orders. It can be your Excalibur. So mastering the rules of debate; moving amendments; speaking concisely so you don’t get cut off half way through a meandering speech by the chair; knowing when to make a declaration of interest; demonstrating sound judgement by showing you have thoroughly read your background papers; treating political opponents, colleagues, staff and constituents with appropriate consideration; knowing when to make a timely intervention in the decision-making process to achieve a policy change: all these expressions of the politicians craft are in the end based on a solid knowledge of council procedures.
My Patch has a different flavour in this issue. Alan Pickstock met Sir Jeremy Beecham, whose patch for many years has been local government as a whole as well as Newcastle City Council and his Benwell and Scotswood ward.

“It’s important for new councillors to get to know their ward, but they must lift their eyes to the horizon and look at policy issues that affect the wider area”

Jeremy Beecham was planning to spend more time in his ward and taking a scrutiny chair after giving up his role as Labour Group Leader at the Local Government Association. But then he got the call to add his experienced voice to debates in the House of Lords.

So there’s no end just yet for the high profile national role Sir Jeremy has filled since the 1980s. Local government has faced many challenges – and had many achievements – over the intervening years, and he’s entering the Lords as it faces up to what looks like being its biggest challenge.

When he was elected in 1967 he was, at 22, the youngest councillor on Newcastle City Council. Forty three years on, he now has an unrivalled experience in local government, locally and nationally. His national work is grounded on a lifetime as a councillor in Newcastle, where he served as leader from 1977 to 1994. He’s also served on Labour’s National Executive Committee.

“I always tell new councillors it is important to learn the trade. They need to know how to get an argument across. They need to get used to talking in the council chamber. It’s important for them to get to know their ward, but they must lift their eyes to the horizon and look at policy issues that affect the wider area. We need people in local government who are capable at a strategic level.” Referencing Edith Cavell’s phrase, he adds: “Localism, like patriotism, is not enough.”

He has a clear affinity for his ward, Benwell and Scotswood, which is in the bottom 10 per cent in terms of deprivation. There’s a mix of housing, but a shortage of affordable housing. Newcastle’s west end is traditionally where migrants had settled, including Jeremy Beecham’s grandparents, and newcomers are a source of some tension today “fanned by the BNP”.

The ward has the familiar characteristics of a deprived area: high mortality and morbidity rates, high levels of heart disease and teenage pregnancy and too many people smoking. Life expectancy is five to six years lower than in the most prosperous wards. Unemployment is high.

“I sense the LGA Conservative leadership have not been particularly comfortable but I hope they’ll stand up for what they believe in”

A big regeneration scheme got underway in Scotswood in April this year and it’s too early to tell what impact the cuts will have on the plans.

Attendance at regular ward surgeries is shared with the other two ward councillors. Newcastle also has a ‘priority areas project’, with ward committees holding budgets for local schemes. He sees this as a good way of getting people involved and of feeding their views into council policy.

It is an active local community. “There’s a wealth of activists, resident groups and community groups. In my ward there are more than 20 groups. Women are particularly active.” The challenge for councillors, he says, is to get them to look at issues more broadly and not promote NIMBYism.

As for the role of the ward councillor, he says it’s not enough just to dispense money. “The ward councillor has to talk about issues and do more to help local people look strategically. We now fight local elections on pavements and graffiti. There’s a danger of plundering the latest concerns then running after votes.

“The ward councillor is a representative, not a delegate. Their job is to exercise judgement. Our job is to get people together – get the police, health, school heads along to talk about what they are doing in the area and hear what people think”.

He’s worried by some of the early pronouncements by the new Secretary of State, Eric Pickles. While Pickles talks about localism he’s stepping into local decisions such as how often to empty the bins and wants to impose elected mayors. Jeremy Beecham is also concerned about the idea of California-style Proposition 13 referendums and direct elections to health and police bodies, which he thinks will undermine the local democratic role of councillors.

But, he says, we’ve been here before. “In 1979, Michael Heseltine said he’d set local
government free: within weeks he announced the first penalties on ‘overspending’ councils – including Newcastle.

“In 1979, the incoming Conservative government doubled VAT”, he recalls.

The proposed cuts will hurt, he thinks. “A 25 per cent cut in three years is a lot to get rid of. It cannot be done by just efficiency.” Locally the signs are not good, though, as One North East, the Regional Development Agency, estimated (in early July) that cuts already announced would lead to the loss of some 3,500 private sector jobs and about 3,000 public sector jobs in the region.

But he says that Total Place opens up possibilities, for example by sharing back office functions and re-engineering services. Total Place shows the way for joint budgets and synergy between services. Jeremy Beecham thinks that local government’s sigh of relief at the abandonment of Labour’s proposal for free home care was premature. “This would have brought health budgets into play for councils. My advice was that the idea should have been piloted and then funded properly. Synergy should bring about more effective services for the benefit of the user and citizens.”

Jeremy Beecham’s new role in the House of Lords will keep him at the centre of local government’s national stage. He became chair of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities in 1984 and later became chair of the Local Government Association. Labour’s election in 1997 was a highpoint – “really exciting”. He had a call from John Prescott even before the results were in asking to see him the weekend after the election. “I remember going in to see Robert Hill [No 10’s local government advisor] in Downing Street and seeing ministers for the first time.” It wasn’t all plain sailing – “God knows we had our differences” – but he clearly relished access to the corridors of power.

“An older Newcastle member told me to be careful or I’d burn out when I was 50. He was right. I was hospitalised”

So he knows what Conservative leaders on the LGA must be feeling now. Experience allows him to pass on advice: “They must be firm and not get steamrollered, which is something we managed to avoid. I sense the LGA Conservative leadership have not been particularly comfortable but I hope they’ll stand up for what they believe in.”

If the Lords hadn’t beckoned, he says he would have liked a scrutiny chair. He’s a member of a scrutiny working group looking into mental health and offenders. With many years chairing committees and leading the council behind him, he’s in a good position to assess the merits of the old committee system against the executive and scrutiny model. “I rather like the new system. It’s not perfect but while in theory the committee system gave backbenchers more influence, I don’t think it delivered that in practice.”

Over the years there were opportunities to stand for parliament, though the only time he actually stood was in 1970 for “an unwinnable seat”. He missed out on selection twice and was very tempted to stand in 1984 “after Kinnock had beaten the Militants”. He said he thought long and hard about if he really wanted to go to Westminster. “I had my family in Newcastle and my professional life – and I was trying to make a name for myself in local government nationally”. The workload as leader of the council and national local government leadership took its toll. In 1994 he says he “crashed”. “Years before an older Newcastle member told me to be careful or I’d burn out when I was 50. He was right. I was hospitalised.” Convalescing in his peaceful garden he thought about what he should do next. “I realised that it wasn’t the travel and the national role that was keeping me awake at night, it was my council responsibilities. So I gave up the leadership – maybe I should have given it up earlier.

“I used to say nobody was indispensable, but I didn’t really believe that! But it was the right decision to give up the leadership”.

But now, Westminster calls again, and Jeremy Beecham enters the Lords because of his unparalleled local government background and credentials.
PEOPLE PLACES POWER: HOW LOCALISM AND STRATEGIC PLANNING CAN WORK TOGETHER

This discussion pamphlet explores how localism and strategic planning can work together. We know the future of local government over the next few years will be shaped by two forces: a drive towards localism and the need to achieve efficiencies and cut spending in a challenging financial context.

In this pamphlet, the LGiU argues that if we are to prevent these drivers from pulling us in opposing directions we will need a fundamental shift in the way we think about local service delivery and the relationship between people, places and power.

PAYING FOR IT

The future of local government finance

This collection of essays tackles one of the thorniest issues in public service – how to fund local government. The Coalition agreement included a commitment to a local government finance review and in the run up to this these essays put forward ideas, questions and areas for discussion that should frame this review.

The LGiU argues that real power means financial freedoms and that strong local democracy is about meeting community needs by weighing competing interests and priorities; resources are critical to this.

These publications can be downloaded free of charge from the LGiU website www.lgiu.org.uk
Making local experience count

Among the new intake of MPs at Westminster are many with experience of local government. We asked three of them to write about their hopes for the new Parliament.

Heather Wheeler  
– former leader of South Derbyshire

Our new coalition government has reacted swiftly to implement the manifesto commitment to scrap the Regional Spatial Strategies and in particular ensure councils and Planning Inspectors take this into account when dealing with traveller camp applications and appeals. I will make sure that this is taken notice of in South Derbyshire where our council has ‘done the right thing’ with official local authority sites, yet, is plagued with unofficial sites and numerous planning applications for even more pitches. We have done our bit. I will also work to ensure that our pledge to introduce a new criminal law of Intentional Trespass comes to the fore too.

Because we have come into government and found the cupboard empty I will use my experience to assist our government to find savings by better working methods across the public sector.

Twenty five percent is not about a macho slash; it is about working in a cleverer, streamlined way. We will cut waste – we will not cut services. When I became Leader of South Derbyshire District Council, from Labour, I inherited an overspend of nearly £1m a year – a ridiculous waste of money. Three years later it is down to £300k, with one or two projects still being worked on. All will have been dealt with in our first four year term – with no reduction in services, cuts in staff plus below inflation rises in Council Tax. That is the experience I bring to government and I am raring to share it with Ministers!

Heidi Alexander  
– former Lewisham councillor

Twelve years ago I was told by a university career advisor that I was destined for a “boring job in local government”. I am pleased to say that Lewisham was anything but boring and I know that had I not been a councillor, I would not be an MP today.

The thing that never ceased to amaze me about Lewisham was the professionalism, commitment and drive of those who worked there. While it could take forever to get anything done, the public perception of councils being full of “jobs-worths” couldn’t have been more wrong. The dedication of our public servants in local government will stay with me for life, as will the vital role played by the voluntary and community sector in our society and the need for public sector bodies to work ever more closely together.

I know that the capital has some very specific challenges that the new government must address – violent crime and gang culture, a desperate shortage of affordable housing, overcrowded tubes and trains. The government must work with councils and the GLA in addressing these problems but must also tackle the big challenges we face – climate change, our ageing population, building a stronger economy and more cohesive society. The role that councils can play in addressing these challenges should not be underestimated. Councils are at the coal-face of public service delivery and know their communities better than anyone. Those in central government would do well to listen to what they say and act on it.

James Morris  
– former Chief Executive of think tank Localis

These are exciting, albeit, challenging times to be a localist.

Through my work with Localis I articulated what might be called a ‘pragmatic localism’ which saw the decentralisation of power to local government and communities as critical to more effective delivery of public services, a enhanced sense of democratic accountability and a crucial mechanism for closing the gap between citizens and government at whatever level. This pragmatic localism sees a critical and enhanced role for local government in catering for the needs of their local areas as well as seeing room for communities and groups – often at the street level – in the management of local public services.

There has been a gathering momentum around this agenda. We now have a unique opportunity to convert this momentum into practical reality. The coalition government has already taken decisive action to reverse the creeping regionalisation which had been one of the main features of the previous government’s policy.

The coalition government is also committed to a fundamental review of local government finance. I welcome this because there is a general recognition that the funding of local government is an obstacle to genuine reform. Local government finance is a fiendishly complex beast but we need to find a way of disentangling it so that the system enables both the decentralisation of powers with genuine financial freedom for local government.

I also believe that we need to build on the work done on examining the total level of public spending in areas to drive thinking about the best way of delivering public services locally.
Coping with the cuts

Janet Sillett considers how councillors should approach setting budgets that deal with the need to make massive cuts.

Local government will have to wait until the Spending Review on 20 October to know the details of the cuts to spending for the next five years, but we all already understand the big picture: everything except the NHS and overseas aid to be cut by an average 25 per cent and defence and education are to have some protection – the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates that if education and defence had to face cuts of only ten per cent, the rest would have to make reductions of 33 per cent.

There is an implicit pact with local government – we give you more freedom and you deliver your share of cuts to reduce the deficit. The government has been quick to act: the comprehensive area assessment is already history and £1.3bn ring-fenced grants are de-ring-fenced. How far financial freedom will actually go is, however, not clear – no-one would bet on the dedicated schools grant being de-ringfenced, (although it will get smaller as more schools become academies) and the budget hinted at a more restrictive framework for prudential borrowing. The promised review of local government finance is not a priority for the coalition and history tells us that finance reviews usually come to nothing.

IFS director, Robert Chote has said that the cuts will “more than reverse the entire increase (in investment) we saw under Labour. We are looking at the longest, deepest, sustained period of cuts to public services spending since the Second World War.” And local government is right at the centre – there is no protection for its non-school services. Services such as libraries are already being fingered as the most vulnerable, and others, such as adult social care, have been under increasing pressure for years. Even if this level of cuts proves unachievable politically for the government and additional cuts to welfare bring the figures down, councils are facing huge unprecedented change – how can they deliver without destroying the fabric of communities?

The first principle has to be that this is a fundamentally political process. That is, it is political beyond the fact that councillors will have hugely diverse views on what the government is demanding, and some will campaign against the premise on which the cuts programme is founded: the decision process within the council is profoundly political too.

The administration is accountable for the choices it makes, whether they are about reconfiguring or sharing services or stopping some services altogether, freezing posts, putting up charges, promoting co-payment or selling assets. The director of adult social care should not be the person on television justifying raising charges. The government says it will give councils greater financial freedom (though not too much probably): de-ringfencing more grants whilst cutting area based grant means councillors will be responsible for more decisions about prioritising spending and be held accountable at the local level.

The majority of the public seem to be supporting the need for cuts, even on this scale. But once they become a reality, how long will public support last? The government says it wants the public to be involved in deciding what to cut and will expect councils to do the same. They may even require referenda on council tax rates and service reductions. Many councils over the last few years have been consulting on their budgets, but it is very different to ask residents what their spending priorities are than to ask them to decide where the axe should fall. It is a no brainer that councils should be explaining the facts and talking to communities about the impact of reduced budgets. But how you engage people in all this is very complex: how much do people understand about council finances and about who delivers services; how can residents be involved effectively in decisions about services they do not use and may not value, but are critical to others – how do councils ensure everyone is heard equally?

What are the key priorities for the political leadership?

Councillors need to know exactly how the council is preparing for unprecedented cuts and that the council is not waiting until the spending review is finally published. Budget reductions on this scale will not be dealt with by across the board cuts. Of course, with the government demanding cuts starting this year and with the...
details for the next period not being known until October and huge cuts required very quickly, it is easy to see how councils may start by making urgent savings and putting up fees and charges wherever they can.

Councillors need to grasp, though, that this cannot work for long – the council needs to be thinking and acting more coherently and strategically. Clear answers from officers are needed to questions such as what the impact will be of a jobs freeze or of selling assets across the board. Has the council got the capacity to deliver such major change and how will it maintain capacity when jobs at all levels will be lost or outsourced. How is the workforce being included in consultation and decisions about service cuts and reorganisation?

A key issue is the role of partnerships. Total Place illustrated that there is potential for improving services and reducing costs by greater collaboration between agencies. But all agencies are facing cuts – will partnerships be weakened or strengthened?

Past experience tells us that when the public sector faces budget reductions, everyone wants to protect their own positions. The severity of the cuts across the public sector this time, coupled with more developed partnership working, may result, however, in agencies facing the restraints more cooperatively. Councillors, especially non-executive ones, can often feel distant from crucial partnerships, but it is important that all councillors feel their voices matter, so that they can represent local communities. If partnerships are going to be a key vehicle for achieving savings whilst not abandoning quality, then every councillor needs to be involved in decisions taken in them and about them.

One of the hardest issues for councils, on their own and in partnership, will be how far they can maintain investment in preventative services and initiatives, where the benefits are not always visible or are not apparent in the short-term. Councillors need as much evidence as possible to demonstrate the value of early intervention and, sometimes, the political courage not to go for immediate savings in these areas.

The majority of the public seem to be supporting the need for cuts, even on this scale. But once they become a reality, how long will public support last?

The picture is even more complex when another agency is the beneficiary, such as health. The NHS ringfence makes the position more difficult. Local government needs to be making a very clear case that promoting health and wellbeing is about far more than investing in acute care and shiny new facilities. If adult social care has to face anything like 25 per cent cuts, there will be hardly any service left in two to three years time. If the ringfence around the NHS remains, then part of that money has to be used for care and for other services that keep people and communities healthy. Not doing so will ruin some people’s lives and will cost much more in the long run. At the local level, councils need to press on with more integrated working with health, and if GP commissioning comes in, then they need to build strong relationships with the new commissioning bodies.

What else is critical? The efficiency agenda is well rehearsed: savings on IT, sharing services; collaborative procurement and strategic commissioning. These are all very familiar, though not always massively successful. Councillors have to be involved in all of this – these are not just issues for management.

The next few years are going to be especially tough for councillors – but, of course, worse for the communities they represent. Local politicians need to be clear about their role – managing the political process, not shadowing the managerial one.
Keeping an eye on the cuts

Scrutiny has an important part to play in helping councils negotiate their way through the cuts, writes Jessica Crowe, Executive Director, Centre for Public Scrutiny.

In 2000, when I was a councillor on Hackney LBC, the authority was issued a Section 114 Notice which stopped all expenditure until an emergency budget was agreed to balance the books by the end of the year. We had to make around £70m cuts on a £280m budget and there was significant local anger and concern about losses to services. The night we set the budget, 400 riot police were required to protect councillors from violent protestors.

Hackney today is very different, with no cuts to front-line services in eight years, and I begin with this story to illustrate the challenges that authorities face over difficult financial decisions and to highlight two key ways in which councillors through scrutiny can help their authority avoid Hackney’s experience.

The first is obviously to avoid getting into financial difficulties in the first place. However, many councils now face the likelihood of drastic cuts due to national public expenditure reductions, unless they can manage their services in very different ways and deliver more for less. Scrutiny in recent years has often had the luxury of being able to investigate varied issues of interest to elected members and to recommend the investment of more resources to improve services. Those days have gone.

The stark reality is that if scrutiny cannot focus its work on the crucial issues that matter to the authority (and partner organisations) and make practical recommendations on how to spend reducing resources to greater effect, there will inevitably be questions about scrutiny’s own value to the authority. The Centre for Public Scrutiny’s recent good scrutiny awards included awards for added value and overall impact. The winners of these two awards illustrate what I mean:

- Warrington’s review of cemetery provision recommended improved cemetery management to save the authority from either having to spend an estimated £1m on more burial space or stopping the service altogether, as they were running out of burial space.
- Hertfordshire have fundamentally changed how they do scrutiny to get the most impact from an under-supported function compared with other county councils – fewer committees, with shorter, more focused reviews and reports, plus a new way of scrutinising the budget.

The second key way for scrutiny members to help their authority through difficult times ahead is through involving the public in the difficult decisions that they face. Authorities today still have time in which to plan for the coming reductions and scrutiny committees should be examining their areas of responsibility with a view to engaging the public and service users in their reviews. Part of Hackney’s problem back in 2000 was having to make the required savings immediately, providing no time for consulting the public on their priorities in terms of what to cut and what to save. Authorities today should be asking questions now about how and when their authority plans to redirect and/or cut budgets, finding out where the areas of greatest pressure are, and agreeing the topics where scrutiny could contribute to a constructive debate with the local community about priorities.

The first is obviously to avoid getting into financial difficulties in the first place. However, the experience of health scrutiny, where committees have considered proposed health service reconfigurations that have generated public opposition campaigns, shows that scrutiny provides an excellent forum in which the public and service providers can meet, hear each other’s views and – sometimes – reach a compromise. Enfield LBC, who won CfPS’s community influence through scrutiny award, showed how the council engaged the community through a scrutiny review after the deaths of five young men involved in gangs, to rebuild community confidence and focus council, police and others’ action on supporting and empowering young people.

Scrutiny members should be asking questions now about how and when their authority plans to redirect and/or cut budgets, finding out where the areas of greatest pressure are, and agreeing the topics where scrutiny could contribute to a constructive debate with the local community about priorities.

Visit www.cfps.org.uk to register for regular scrutiny updates and to see the other award winners and runners-up in Successful Scrutiny 2010, to be published shortly.
Are you ready for the media storm?

Ashley Wilcox, Chair of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations local public services group says good communications with the media is even more important for councillors in time of cuts.

As the cuts start to bite, councils will find themselves under ever more intense media scrutiny. Many councils who may have become used to releasing predominantly good news about new investment, council tax freezes and new facilities, will have to get used to telling people things that they don’t want to hear, and to dealing with the inevitable backlash in the local media.

As tough decisions are made, the best way for councils to approach media relations is with candour, transparency and clarity of purpose. The government has done its job well in preparing the country for the cuts agenda, so residents are expecting bad news. However, what seems palatable to people in national newspaper headlines, suddenly becomes less acceptable when it is their school, community centre or refuse service that is affected. The national climate is creating fear and uncertainty for residents who rely very heavily on council services, such as adult social care. Many of these people will be scanning the local media, looking for news of where the axe will fall and how it will affect their lives.

Decisions made at a local level need to be communicated quickly, proactively and with a clear rationale. Competing demands from local pressure groups and campaigners will mean that decisive leadership will be essential, and elected members will find themselves being held personally and politically accountable by their local media. It is important that council leaders and executive members should front cuts packages in the media, rather than devolving this responsibility to officers. The decisions about what to cut are essentially going to be political ones, and members should be prepared with a clear narrative about why certain decisions have been made and priorities chosen. If local media are proactively approached as a partner in communicating this agenda to residents, the outcome will be far more positive than if journalists have to ‘uncover’ each new funding cut as it emerges, and then run it as a fresh negative story about the council. Failure to engage proactively with the media will also leave an open goal for local pressure groups and campaigners to set the news agenda.

Local media will fiercely hold councils to account about spending decisions but additional pressure is coming on a daily basis from the national press. Journalists are taking the public sector to task over any aspect of its business that could be perceived to be an example of ‘waste’ or ‘bureaucracy’. Not a day passes without one council or another being pilloried in the Daily Mail for some perceived outrage against common sense and efficiency; recruitment to a daft sounding post, spending on a scheme of doubtful public worth, yet another example of political correctness having gone expressingly mad.

We have all at one time or another been on the receiving end of one of these stories, and we are increasing in frequency and intensity. Councillors, with their finely honed political antennae, are often the ones who can spot these stories coming, and can tell when something officers are proposing would not be well received by their constituents, or by the press. They are also the ones, who as the face and voice of their organisations end up defending what is often perceived by the public to be indefensible. Councillors should not feel bullied by the media into apologising for providing services or schemes that meet a genuine local need, just because the press doesn’t like the way they are described, but neither should they feel pressured by officers into defending something that in the new economic reality can no longer be justified.

In a climate of uncertainty, the pressure is on for councils to provide information about what will be cut and when, and councillors need time and space to make those decisions properly. Unfortunately, that time and space may be used by the media for speculation, fuelling the fears of resident groups and service users. Councillors need to work more closely than ever with their communications staff to negotiate the difficult times ahead, not just to protect the reputations of our organisations, but more importantly to make sure that the information going out to local residents via the media is accurate, proportionate, reassuring when appropriate, straightforward and clear.

Find out more about media, pr and general communications at the CIPR local public services annual conference this October. http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/lps-annual-conference-2010
Hammersmith & Fulham is leading the radical revolution in local government that our nation’s finances require, says the council’s leader Stephen Greenhalgh.

In our first term of administration we made significant inroads into cutting the council’s debt by £36 million. We also cut our share of council tax bills by three per cent for the last four years in a row and made nearly £53 million worth of council savings. At the same time H&F had the biggest increase in Britain in satisfaction and value-for-money scores from its residents.

H&F has a simple blueprint to deliver ‘more for less’. We have coined this H&F’s “A B C” approach. A is for “asset management”. We have pledged to protect vital front-line services rather than bricks and mortar. Our focus on ‘services not buildings’ and our priority is to pay off the borough’s £133 million non-housing debt mountain. We are currently spending £5 million a year on debt interest payments. This means that £5 million is wasted each year before a street is cleaned, a bin is emptied, or a park improved.

So how are we going to cut the debt? Our commitment to prioritise services rather than bricks and mortar has seen us put up ‘for sale signs’ at ten council buildings that are either underused or provide poor value for money. The days of council buildings in every street are gone. We believe that this should generate £20 million, which would be used to pay off debt, cut interest repayments and free up more than £2 million in cash for frontline services every year.

B is for budgetary control. We have a government target to reduce spending by around £55 million over the next three years. Above all our approach is to control costs rather than simply allocate budgets. We have controlled growth each year to deliver net savings of £24 million over the last four years compared to a net growth of £8 million under the previous administration.

C is for cost reduction. We need to be innovative if we are to protect frontline services. For instance we have recently announced groundbreaking plans to merge our local education authority with neighbouring Westminster City Council. The move is the first of its kind and we expect it will make savings of around 20 per cent in three years, improve school standards and our ability to tackle failing schools as well as accelerate the delivery of free schools. The proposed merger is a prime example of how councils can cut costs and improve frontline services at the same time.

This venture has won praise from Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles who visited the borough recently. He said: “There is great potential for more locally-led joint working, the sharing of back office functions and greater cooperation both between councils and between councils and other local public bodies. I welcome this latest venture.”

Our drive to cut costs has also seen us exposing our accounts to public scrutiny to drive out every last penny of waste. We have just become one of the first local authorities in the UK to publish on our website a detailed list of transactions amounting to more than £500. And we shall update the list every three months. The company names of suppliers and the amounts are published in full on the website so that residents can hold us to account.

We will look to reduce costs in two distinct ways. First we will merge or share council services with our neighbours. Second we will propose to the coalition government that this council should be responsible for the delivery of more local public services in some of the areas currently run from Whitehall such as joblessness, long-term care and offender management.

These are both exciting and challenging times. I hope that the offer of less funding but significantly more power will unleash an era of municipal entrepreneurship.

Stephen Greenhalgh (left) with London’s Mayor, Boris Johnson
Lambeth’s big idea

Lambeth is consulting on its plans to become Britain’s first cooperative council. The proposals outline how it will protect frontline services and make them more responsive to local need. That means reshaping the relationship between citizens and public services in favour of ordinary people, says council leader Steve Reed.

Labour’s proposals were trailed in the Guardian back in February, months before David Cameron launched his ‘Big Society’ proposals. There are some superficial similarities, but there is a fundamental difference at the heart of the two models. The Tories want to roll back the state, while Labour wants to change the role of the state. For the Tories, Big Society is all about small government. It seeks to close down public services and hand them over to charities. In Barnet the Conservative council was more blatant than Cameron has been about his plans. The approach was described as ‘EasyCouncil’ comparing public services to a budget airline, with a basic level of service available to the majority while the wealthy few can pay more for upgrades to better quality. That two-tier model is unacceptable to anyone who cares about social justice.

Labour’s cooperative model is different. We listened to local people who said they wanted more control and we set about making this happen in different ways in different services. In housing, we support more tenant-managed estates than any other council and the best of these deliver better housing management at lower cost. We opened the country’s first parent-promoted secondary school, Elmgreen School and found it was so popular it became one of the most sought-after schools in the borough even before it opened. On a tough inner-city estate plagued by gang violence we helped the community set up a peer mentoring scheme that achieved the highest success rate in the country for preventing reoffending. We set up a local environmental scheme that handed local groups the tools to clear up patches of derelict land and turn them into community spaces, and residents used a disused launderette on a local estate and turned it into a community building where they now run a hugely successful children’s centre. Local people have shown they want to get involved and that they deliver successfully.

What all these models have in common is a set of values: fairness, accountability and responsibility. These are cooperative values and they have a long tradition in the history of communities in our country. The outcomes are fair because they meet local needs; the services are accountable to local people; and they differ fundamentally from what went before because of the responsibility a local community chooses to take on.

We have published a consultation paper called ‘The Cooperative Council: A new settlement between citizens and public services’. It sets seven principles that we believe underpin our cooperative council model. These are: the need for strong, democratic accountability; tailoring services to meet the needs of individuals and communities; empowering citizens to play an active role in their community; improving local employment opportunities to tackle poverty; reshaping the settlement between the citizen and the state; bringing services closer together so they work better for individuals; providing better value for money. In each of these areas we outline our thinking and have invited local people and outside experts to help us answer questions that remain unresolved as we work towards a final model.

I believe this is an exciting moment for local government as we step up to the challenge of the looming cuts in public spending. It will not be enough to simply cut back services, charge more or ration services only to the most vulnerable. We need to find a new way to deliver public services so we can protect universal provision as far as possible, but also adapt to a changed world where society is more complex and people expect more choice and control.
Task force sails to save the environment

Alongside the challenge of cuts, other issues such as species extinctions, floods, stalled recycling rates and poor air quality are becoming more urgent, writes Andy Johnston, LGiU’s Head of Centre for Local Sustainability.

The causes are complex but a new solution is becoming clear. Protecting the environment will have to be done with much less money and local communities will be expected to contribute more.

A pioneering group of councils has recognised that as the way we manage our environment changes it is vital that local authorities play their part and that they are ready and able. These councils have established the Green Councils Task Force. The task force met for the first time in July. The purpose of the initial meeting was to establish the principles that would guide the task force and its objectives. The first Chair is Councillor Ken Thornber, leader of Hampshire County Council and a committed environmental champion.

"Helping councils navigate this new landscape drives the work of the task force... Councils need to be consistent about the green message"

The members of the Green Councils Task Force are: Hampshire, Durham, Manchester, Liverpool, Cardiff, Kent, Essex, Suffolk, Camden, Bristol and Kirklees. They are all powerful councils that for different reasons (political commitment, history, community demand or financial pragmatism) have recognised the strategic importance of environmental localism.

The change of government has resulted in an altered landscape in two important ways. First, councils will have to develop new more frugal ways of working that engages neighbourhoods and civil society. For example, the highly successful ‘Greening Campaign’ which encourages small easy changes in behaviour that make a big difference or ‘Transition Towns’ that combine climate change with concern about peak oil to offer radical grassroots alternatives.

Second, there will be new policy. The government has announced a white paper on the natural environment, though the content is unclear it should be an opportunity to advance localist ideas. There will be a review of waste policy thought to be in response to more ambition coming from Wales and Scotland. There will be a draft water bill, which is important in itself but is also an opportunity to include measures to finance flood protection. Arguably the most significant policy will be the energy bill which will include the green deal for households to fit insulation.

Helping councils navigate this new landscape drives the work of the task force, but first it was necessary to identify existing good practice.

Some dominant themes emerged such as getting the public involved. In one case local children from all backgrounds were encouraged to comment on the work of the council. Some councils have started up campaigns to engage the public and a sure fire way of generating interest is to offer money, maybe through a green community fund. Another dominant theme was the need for real concerted, coordinated and long term action across many fronts. Councils need to be consistent about the green message. It isn’t good enough to simply do a bit on transport if a pot of money turns up but then to stop when the money runs out and switch attention to, say, recycling.

Towards the end of the meeting there was constructive debate about future priorities. One idea was to promote a greater focus on adaptation to climate change and in particular examining how to target resources. Should resources go to areas worst affected by climate change or tackle a particular topic such as flooding or help the most vulnerable? There was unanimous support for the task force being cross party.

At the end of the meeting it was agreed that the Green Councils Task Force should concentrate on identifying good practice, stimulating innovation, spread the word about the importance of the green agenda, disseminate the solutions available and engage with national government. The next meeting will be in the autumn to coincide with the expected policy announcements and Councillor Thornber will be inviting the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Chris Huhne MP to address the next meeting.

To find out more about the Task Force, contact andy.johnston@lgiu.org.uk.
Out of site, out of mind?

The fortunes of Gypsies and Travellers have tended to change with political weather, although on this occasion the winds may veer less than anticipated, writes Hilary Kitchin.

The initial steps by the new government have indicated a harsher environment: the final tranche of funding to meet accommodation needs has been axed and the allocation of site provision on a regional basis has been abolished. Yet is does seem likely that the Coalition will set ground rules that ultimately trump some of the more severe promises – a criminal offence of intentional trespass and a reduction in protection afforded by the Human Rights Act – made in the Conservative Open Source Planning Green Paper earlier this year.

Many councils have been successful in approving or providing well designed and managed Gypsy and Traveller sites that are accepted by more settled communities, generate income, and enable these profoundly deprived groups to access education and health services. And these services are really needed: life expectancy for men and women is 10 years lower than the national average; mothers are 20 times more likely than in the general population to experience the death of a child; in 2003, less than a quarter of Gypsy and Traveller children obtained GCSEs and A*-C grades, compared to a national average of over half.

In other areas, as a recent EHRC report pointed out, Gypsies and Travellers continue to be the focus of social tension with accommodation issues at the core. People living near unauthorised sites often object to developments without planning permission or where there are poor environmental consequences. The media nationally and locally give widespread coverage to such issues – indeed these difficulties can be highlighted in a way that undermines efforts to find local solutions.

And here lies the central paradox: an absence of authorised sites, whether permanent or providing for transitory travellers, whether privately owned or provided by councils as part of housing programmes, leads inevitably to unauthorised encampments. And unauthorised encampments, with equal inevitability, lack facilities for washing and hygiene, waste disposal, storage, and areas for children’s play or care for animals. Further complications can arise, in that Gypsy and Traveller families are more likely to take their accommodation issues into their own hands and apply for retrospective planning approval for sites that they buy or seek to rent from private landlords.

Coalition ministers are scathing about the framework set up by the last government – designed to increase the provision of authorised sites and reduce the impact of unauthorised encampments – but they recognise the same challenge. The Open Source Planning paper accepts that “councils need to provide authorised sites locally if they are to be able to take effective action against unauthorised sites”.

Matthew Brindley, of Irish Travellers Movement in Britain, suggests that the commitment has to be more than rhetorical, “For the Conservatives to honour their pre-election pledge to provide stronger enforcement powers they first need to develop a stronger policy on allocating, planning and supplying pitches for Gypsy and Traveller communities”.

Ministerial guidance on the recent revocation of regional strategies seems to confirm this approach, advising that authorities take the accommodation assessments that they have carried out under 2004 housing legislation as their starting point when assessing what is required to meet the needs of travelling communities. But the obligation doesn’t stop there, as Brindley continues, “even then Travellers human rights should always be properly considered before enforcement”.

Nancy Astley, of Planning Aid for London, refers to human rights law when considering the future of site provision, making a working assumption that local authorities will have to meet at least minimum requirements. Rights cannot be applied on a discriminatory basis, and should the new Commission on the Human Rights Act be asked whether restrictions can be imposed on the need to consider an individual’s right to family life if relevant to a planning application, there will be considerable weight behind the case for ensuring that the human rights of Gypsies and Travellers are protected, as they are for all.
COMMUNITY SAFETY

Responsible drinking campaign was on the ball

A crack down on the irresponsible sale of alcohol caused quite a stir when it was launched in Bexley before the World Cup. Katie Perrior, Bexley’s Cabinet Member for Community Services reports.

The council, in partnership with Bexley police, made national news after organising a ‘controversial’ seminar, during which more than 100 local licensees were confronted with irrefutable proof that some were failing to take their responsibilities seriously.

It began with an impressive performance by two actors playing the roles of two outrageously drunk customers at a bar. Afterwards, when asked who would have served such a pair at their own establishments, not a single trader raised a hand.

Then came the crunch – the police revealed that just a few days previously these same drunken performances had been carried out at a number of local pubs (including those represented at the seminar) – and they had been sold alcohol every time!

The traders were left in no doubt that if they fuelled alcohol related disorder by serving customers who are already drunk, particularly with major World Cup events on the way, they could face closure.

General advice on ‘good practice’ was also given – such as using plastic drinks containers, closing down for an hour before evening games and an hour after afternoon games to help deter overlong drinking sessions and making England games ticket only events.

Bexley’s over-riding aim is to make sure that the celebration of any major events will always allow people to have fun but within a safe, family friendly environment.

Drunkenness also puts a strain on the emergency services and alcohol related crime is a serious issue. Sixty-three per cent of rape allegations in Bexley during 2009/10 were alcohol related.

So now that the dust has settled and England’s hopes of World Cup glory have been put aside for another four years – was Bexley’s campaign a success?

At the time of writing this article – and with just one major game left to be shown around the local pubs (the World Cup final) - the facts so far echo a resounding YES.

At the close of play on 27 June (England’s farewell game in the tournament) more than 99 per cent of Bexley’s licensed premises had demonstrated a professional and responsible attitude.

Just two pubs had to be shown the red card. One of those had its licence suspended following a serious assault and overcrowding, while the other closed voluntarily following an assault on a group of under-aged drinkers on the premises.

Pubs, off-licences and supermarkets in Station Road and High Street, Sidcup, where a unique partnership was established between normally competitive alcohol retailers, deserve particular praise.

Remarkably, they voluntarily agreed to put public safety ahead of profit. That meant off-licences suspended alcohol sales to coincide with the closing times of local pubs and the town’s supermarkets restricted the sale of alcohol at these times, insisting they had to be part of a larger food shopping visit.

Louie Blythe, manager of a local pub is typical in his reaction. “The World Cup started quietly for us but by the third game, the premises were absolutely buzzing with customers, including families with children. We are definitely behind any measures which back up our own policies to provide a safe, family friendly atmosphere for our customers.”

I am proud of the strong partnership working between the Council, police and licensees. Bexley proves time and time again that it is not afraid to lead the way and the results show that we were well and truly on the ball with our latest campaign.
Fact or fiction

Phil Jones says we should watch out for policies underpinned by ‘claim creep’. Not all ‘facts’ are quite what they seem.

The well-known game of ‘Chinese Whispers’ is, apparently, more often known in the USA as ‘Telephone’, a less stereotyping term. Whatever you call it, you’ll certainly know that what you say may not be the same as what gets heard. Relationship councillors make a good living from this premise.

That’s the oral tradition for you, whether spoken at low volume or not. But the same pitfalls apply to data used in the formulation of public policy. Here’s one example.

In 2006 an article in The Guardian featured a children’s home in Copenhagen where more than 60 per cent of the children went on to higher education, around ten times the rate for care leavers in England. It’s an impressive statistic and was used to illustrate the ‘social pedagogy’ approach, in Denmark and some other European countries, to children’s social care and education. That system has generated considerable interest in recent years and is currently being piloted in 30 children’s homes in this country.

Two years later, the Centre for Social Justice produced Couldn’t Care Less, a report on all aspects of the children’s care system. It directly referenced the Guardian article but declared that “Some children’s homes in Denmark send around 60 per cent of care leavers to university” (my italics). My dictionary allows for ‘some’ to mean an unspecified number, a considerable amount, or a little – no doubt delighting compilers of cryptic crosswords – but the plural ‘homes’ surely represents a little mild inflation?

We move on to 2009, in which the blog of a BBC correspondent states that “In Britain, six out of a hundred care leavers will go on to higher education; in Denmark, it is six out of ten”. Again, it extols the virtues of social pedagogy, but does not provide any statistical sources for what is presented as a fact. And the focus of the ‘fact’ itself has mutated, from care leavers in children’s homes to care leavers in general.

The difference is important because, according to a report by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, residential care in England is largely seen as a “last resort for extremely challenging young people who are difficult to place in foster homes, and who have often experienced many breakdowns already”. In Denmark, the proportion of those in care in residential settings, at around 45 per cent, is over three times that in England. Staff in the Danish system also have a higher status and level of qualifications, and have extensive training to work with families as well as children. So such comparisons are often problematic.

The example I’ve given is at the well-intentioned end of ‘claim creep’ – nobody is denying that outcomes for children in care are poor and that this requires concerted and sustained action. But we don’t know if that one care home in Denmark is typical, firstly, of all that country’s care homes, or secondly, of all Danish care leavers – as implied by the BBC. A study from Denmark in 2008 in fact admitted that “very little evidence demonstrates whether or not young people from a public care background pursue further education after compulsory school” – the research studies just haven’t been carried out.

It’s tempting for policy makers, and politicians in particular, to latch on to such data and follow routes which imply simple solutions, or greener grass elsewhere, whereas the reality may be more complex and evidence in fact mixed – on school structures, or the teaching of reading for example. At the more pernicious end of the spectrum, it’s well-known that newspapers may publish invented stories which become ‘facts’, often subsequently hard to challenge – blogs and Twitter can now promulgate them on a viral scale.

There are perhaps two lessons here for local government. First, the need for a healthy scepticism about policies pursued by any central government, for which ‘claim creep’ is likely to be second nature. Further, to ensure that it doesn’t fall into the same trap when developing local policies, in an era of financial stringency, that need to be securely evidence-based.
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Lessons from the glorious summer of 1940

Alan Waters has his own unique take on the cuts facing local government. If he’s right, it will all turn out OK in the end.

I am not a great enthusiast for the Daily Mail. However I do flick through some of the back copies of this middle England staple as I lay sheets of the paper in the bottom of the hutch for the incontinent guinea pigs my mother has running around her back garden. The frequency with which I have to carry out this task has given me the leisure to do a bit of what sociologists call ‘Content Analysis’.

The front page is always eye catching and invariably accuses some hapless asylum seeker, teenage mum or recipient of meagre benefits of the kind of ills with which only the four horsemen of the apocalypse could reasonably be expected to compete.

The subject matter of the paper is not unremittingly bleak: even the Mail has to soothe the furrowed brow of its readers; so present dangers are linked with past glories. More often than not it is the years of maximum danger at the start of the Second World War to which the Mail returns, when ‘Appeasement’ was discredited, France fell and the nation rallied around Winston Churchill. The visual shorthand: a picture of a Spitfire; Churchill’s ‘V’ sign; Morrison Shelters being dug in back gardens and German tanks rolling through Belgium and northern France shape a now familiar narrative.

The fall of Belgium and France during that hot summer in 1940 came as a tremendous shock. The German success owed much to the tactics of ‘Blitzkrieg’ or “lightning war”. It was a tactic combining light tank units supported by planes and infantry. Blitzkrieg was based on speed, co-ordination and movement. It was designed to hit hard and move on instantly. Its aim was to create panic amongst the civilian population. Blitzkrieg ruthlessly applied the psychology of terror. Those civilians fleeing the fighting were also attacked to create further mayhem. It was used to devastating effect in Poland and Western Europe where the Allies were pushed back to the beaches of Dunkirk.

Seventy years on local government is living through its own version of Blitzkrieg, to deliver the deficit reduction strategy of the Coalition high command. Regular ‘in year’ cuts ‘bombshells’ (usually announced on a Friday afternoon) with the unspecified threats of more to come are leading to confusion and fear.

Local government, desperate to understand the true scale of the forces ranged against it, finds its defensive budget strategies immediately swept aside by rapid pincer movements of further rounds of budget cuts.

But what of the local authorities own high command? What is the Local Government Association leadership doing? If the honours – peerages, knighthoods etc – distributed liberally among its current leadership were a reflection of real power then there might be some hope of a counter attack. However these largely ceremonial baubles, in the present situation, are about as useful as cavalry against tanks.

The messages of comfort rolling out from the LGA press office sound like Chamberlain after Munich: ‘We have spoken to Mr Pickles, Mr Groves, the Chancellor, the Prime-Minister (delete as applicable) and we have a piece of paper on which is written their assurance that the role and influence of local government is very important.’

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During the Second World War new tactics were developed to deal with Blitzkrieg and blunted the strategy which had once swept all before it. If local government wants a future rather than to be left in fragments, there is, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, ‘no alternative’ but to do the same.

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David Low’s famous cartoon drawn after the signing of the Munich agreement shows a stout stone wall symbolising ‘collective security’ blasted through with a large hole and replaced by a note with the words: ‘I will be good’, signed Adolf Hitler while Chamberlain and his key advisers frolic with gambolling lambs. That cartoon needs to be on the office wall of every local government leader as a warning against deluded optimism.

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Immigration: vote winner or vote loser?

As the Coalition here introduces a new cap on immigration, Chris Mead reports on some of the zanier ideas that have surfaced in the US for ‘dealing’ with immigration.

July 4, Independence Day, has just rolled by and in San Francisco late-night revelers celebrated by setting off bangers the size of a quarter-stick of dynamite. Once awoken, your correspondent is inclined to mooch around his downtown condo staring at the distant phalanx of office buildings. Even in the wee small hours lights are going on and off as the cleaning staff make their rounds. I can hardly make out the tiny figures as they conscientiously dust, empty trashcans, and mop the floors, but I am pretty darn certain about one thing: none of them were born in the United States.

America is now home to 38 million first-generation immigrants, many performing the work the natives are no longer willing to do and others like me, Mr. Supercomputer, performing the work the natives cannot do. It’s said that outside every American embassy in the developing world there are two crowds: one is holding up banners saying ‘Death to Yankee Imperialism’ while the other is queuing for visas. Astonishingly, for each of the last four years the US has taken in more permanent immigrants than the rest of the world combined, and so far we’re only talking about the legal ones.

So how did we all get in? The easiest way is to marry an American or be a close relative, and this how the majority acquire citizenship. I took another route by being a technical specialist sponsored by my employer.

The goal of every new arrival is a green card. This magic document (which isn’t green anymore) is a permanent residence visa. Once you’ve got one becoming a citizen is usually a formality, although you still have to take an exam. The toughest part of the quiz is keeping a straight face.

“Do you intend to overthrow the government of the United States?” my examiner asked. “Don’t help me!” I cried. “I know this one…”

Slowing the tides of illegals entering the country still leaves the 12 million or so who have already got in. Deporting them all would be virtually impossible, create tremendous hardship, and bring agriculture and other parts of the economy to a halt. But saying “Oh, all right, you can all stay” is unfair to those who played by the rules and would not exactly discourage the 500 million or so Latinos still south of the border.

There is no easy solution, so why muck about thinking when you can be a demagogue? Arizona has led the way by enacting an appalling law that authorises police to detain anyone who cannot prove they are not an illegal immigrant. Who do you think will get arrested: Billy Bob staggering out of the Lonesome Cowboy Bar or Doctor Juan Hernandez hurrying home from Saint Jude’s Hospital?

Fortunately, demagoguery has a price: all those new citizens from Central and South America have the vote, and they do not appreciate politicians who want to throw their friends and relatives into jail. This is becoming a major problem for the Republicans whose core supporters are rabidly anti-immigrant but who are traditionally strongest in states with growing Latino populations.

So what of the future? No-one can deny the energy and dynamism that the new arrivals bring to the country, all them determined to make good, and so far the famous melting pot is holding up, albeit with a few strains. My dentist is from Pakistan and his assistant is Latvian, but when the three of us are in his surgery we talk to each other – our mannerisms, the subjects we discuss, the jokes we make – like Americans. We are all proud of our heritage but as long as we are also willing to be American this great Union will hold. They had the right idea on July 4, 1776 when they put out of many, one – on the seal of the brand-new United States. The guy who suggested it was Swiss. 

Monument for those who have died attempting to cross the US-Mexican border. Each coffin represents a year and the number of dead.