



In a statement to the House of Commons on 23 March, local government minister Nick Raynsford announced his decision to cap the 2005/6 budgets of nine district councils. These are Aylesbury Vale, Daventry, Hambleton, Huntingdonshire, Mid Bedfordshire, North Dorset, Runnymede, Sedgemoor and South Cambridgeshire. The nine now have twenty-one days to lodge their appeals. In a statement on the day the LGA reiterated our opposition to capping, pointing out that the councils capped are all low tax and low spend. The capped councils all have below average council taxes but perversely now face rebilling costs of tens of thousands of pounds. As in 2004 the LGA finance staff will work closely with the capped authorities over the coming weeks. We held meetings at the LGA for member authorities facing capping on 11 and 30 March, and will continue to offer expert support.

Budget 2005

The Chancellor made his budget statement to parliament on 16 March. The budget does not provide long term solutions to the funding problems facing local councils – an estimated £1.5 billion funding black hole. The LGA will continue to press our point that a radical overhaul of local government funding is necessary to address these pressures. More information on our alternative proposals on the balance of funding is available on the website.

Council tax paying households with someone over 65 will receive £200 towards the cost of their bill. These payments will be made at the same time as the 2005 Winter Fuel Payment. Although welcome, it is a one off payment only, and the £800 million it will cost in 2005-06 has not been built into future years' spending plans.

Philip Hampton published his final report 'Reducing administrative burdens: effective inspection and enforcement' alongside the budget. It recommends reducing the number of current regulators from 31 to 7 which the LGA welcomes. Alongside the Hampton review the budget also sets out proposals on inspection including the long term rationalisation of national public services' inspectorates from eleven to four with the aim of reducing and refocusing inspection activity. This simplification of the regime is a step in the right direction, but the government needs to be more ambitious. The LGA has called for a halving in the burden of inspection by 2008.

The LGA also welcomed the announcement of a refund of VAT on welfare services such as childcare and children's centres. The LGA has long been lobbying that VAT was an

arbitrary barrier to councils achieving goals set by central government for providing children's services. The Budget included a new Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) scheme which will be worth £50m in 2006-07 rising to £150m by 2008-09, aiming to release the economic and productivity potential of the most deprived local areas through enterprise and investment. A continuing simplification of housing benefit and council tax benefit administration was also announced.

The LGA welcomed the announcement of free off peak local area bus travel for those aged over 60 and people with disabilities in England from April 2006, though we have made clear that it is critical that sufficient resources are made available to meet the full cost of this scheme. The LGA will be looking to ensure that the announced figure is demonstrably additional and is not 'lost' within the overall EPCS block. While the announcement theoretically does not affect the current Gershon review of concessionary fares administration, it is possible that the balance of demand for different schemes where there are local options, and maybe demand for local public transport use on subsidised networks, may change considerably if there is widespread take-up. We will continue to work with DfT on this issue and will keep member authorities updated on progress.

A detailed briefing on the budget and implications for local government is available on the LGA website or from LGConnect.



Litter binned

At the time of writing, the clean neighbourhoods and environment bill had just completed its second reading in the House of Lords and we are still hopeful that it will receive royal assent before any dissolution of parliament. The bill is the product of two years of behind the scenes lobbying work by the LGA and should provide significant new powers for district councils. Members and officers at the LGA worked closely with local authority representatives (particularly from district councils) to identify a 'shopping list' of measures that we would wish to see included in legislation. We gathered support from partner organisations and made consistent representations to ministers, officials, select committee enquiries and so on. Virtually the entire list of measures that we were seeking was subsequently included in the bill which should help councils address a wide range of local environmental quality issues - including abandoned vehicles, fly-posting, fly-tipping, littering and graffiti. New powers should help local authorities with enforcement and deterring offenders. We would like to thank all those councils which responded to our requests for information in connection with this work.



Gypsy and traveller sites

The LGA's response to the ODPM consultation on planning for gypsy and traveller sites outlines a number of concerns around the workability and practical implementation of the proposals, particularly in terms of the timetable for reform, the need for better co-ordination at regional and national levels and the need for greater resources to support councils to plan for and develop appropriate site provision. We also argue for stronger enforcement powers and are proposing that Government prohibits applications for retrospective planning permission for all new builds and other substantive developments.

Offers you can't refuse

The Local Government Association provides a range of information services to ensure that member authorities are kept up to date with lobbying work. LGconnect, the association's information centre - now a well established section of the LGA - provides a dedicated team of customer advisors to deal with any enquiries that you or a colleague may have, either about the LGA or other local government issues. The team are also able to advise on the full range of LGA publications, communications and events.

There have also been a range of developments on the LGA website aimed at improving the interactivity of the site. There is now a fully enabled webshop facility through which you can purchase

priced publications online. The past year has seen a significant increase in the number of meetings and events that are webcast, allowing you to view some of the sessions you have been unable to attend.

A new range of e-bulletins are now also available through the website. This service will send information on the areas you select straight to your desktop. You can sign up through the 'email services' section of the website or by calling the LGconnect team.

Another useful internet resource is www.local.gov.uk. This portal website features the top stories, features, events and jobs from the LGA and central body websites. It provides a handy way to keep up to date with the range of work performed by the national local government bodies.

If you would like to find out more about any of the services mentioned please call LGconnect (0207 664 3131 or email info@lga.gov.uk) - they are there to help.

LGA annual conference and exhibition

5-8 July 2005, Harrogate

Improving lives in local communities

Planning for this year's annual conference is well underway and this year we are focussing on the need to ensure that there is sufficient interest in the programme for delegates from all districts. The conference programme provides interest to delegates from all authorities but we will be providing more detailed information on individual sessions of specific interest to district councils.

There will also be a conference guide for district councils produced and made available within the delegate bags at the conference.



Two separate breakfast meetings have been arranged for district chief executives and district leaders on Wednesday 6 July, from 8.00am - 9.00am in the Moat House Hotel. Agreed breakout sessions include: rural districts – the improvement challenge; spreading the benefits of town and city centre renewal: making it work! and the Children Act 2004 – what district councils have to offer. At least three of the debate sessions are also of key interest to district authorities: licensing; gypsies and travellers and transport.

You can view the whole conference programme at www.lgaconference.net

Spreading the benefits of town and city centre renewal

Much of current urban policy is focused on the regeneration of urban centres and the role of big cities as engines of economic growth. But how can we maximise the benefits of these developments and make sure that suburbs, smaller towns and outlying urban settlements share in the economic and cultural gains from city or town centre renewal?

An LGA/SIGOMA conference on 25 May aims to discuss some joint research,

highlight successes and challenges of urban renewal in different types of area, promote a better understanding of current trends and explore the differing roles of local authorities. It will contribute to the debate on how urban policy at a national, regional and local level can meet the needs of all urban areas. Delegates will have an opportunity to attend case study workshops as well as participate in the debate. A booking form is available on the LGA website.

Time please

The LGA and LACORS (the Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services) have warned that councils could face a flood of licence applications, unless the low number of applications made under the new licensing regime picks up quickly. Under the new legislation, all pubs, clubs, bars, restaurants, theatres, cinemas and takeaways have until 6 August to apply to their local council to transfer their existing licence, regardless of when their current licence expires and whether or not they intend to vary their opening hours. If they do not apply for their new licence before 6 August, existing rights will no longer be unconditionally given. Moreover, businesses that do not have a licence when the new regime goes live later in the year will face prosecution if they continue to trade. If a lot of premises apply near the end of this period added pressure will be placed on licensing authorities. LACORS is working with the government to ensure that any issues of interpretation of technical legal matters are clarified immediately to ensure licensing authorities can process applications efficiently once received. If you would like any more information, contact LGConnect.

Strike cancelled

Following earlier meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister and the local government trade unions, we were pleased that the proposed strike action over changes to the local government pension scheme was called off. We have stressed that local government must have a sustainable pension scheme which is fair to employees and tax payers alike. The LGA will be taking part in discussions to ensure a viable long term pension scheme. The LGA and local government employers are committed to this purpose.

A new performance framework and CPA 2005

It is often said that what gets measured gets done – so the launch by local government minister Nick Raynsford MP of a discussion paper on developing a new performance framework for local government is important for all councils. Speaking at an LGA national conference on assessing local performance, the minister outlined the key principles of the framework, which aim to strengthen councils' accountability to the public and service users.

Published jointly by ODPM and the Treasury, the paper 'Securing better outcomes: developing a new performance framework' is intended to stimulate debate. ODPM is inviting views over the coming months on issues such as national and local target setting, developing more effective information systems, and ways of refocusing inspection and audit where they can add most value. The LGA has welcomed the government's recognition that the way forward is to strengthen local accountability and we would like to see a greater reliance on local government managing its own performance effectively. Knowing what local people and service users want must be a key part of any performance management system.

As far as CPA is concerned, we understand that there is likely to be further consultation on proposals for district councils. The LGA has pressed the point that the proposals did not make clear the implications of the changes for district councils. We understand that the Audit Commission is currently taking stock of inspection issues for district councils and we are keen to work with the commission and our district council members to develop an approach that is best tailored to districts' needs.

LAAs - ambition into action

Many congratulations to authorities engaged in the first set of Local Area Agreement pilots which were signed off by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Local and Regional Government at LGH on 22 March. A number of district councils are engaged in the process and were present at the ceremony, which marked the turning of ambition for change, into action on the ground. The 20 signed pilot agreements will bring together more than 100 different programmes, representing £500 million of funding. By focusing on a

core set of outcomes for an area, LAAs will help sweep away a raft of measures previously linked to separate funding streams and help streamline hundreds of targets to an average of fewer than 60. The Deputy Prime Minister also invited authorities to express an interest for a second wave of 40 pilots, which will be linked to the LPSA process. We have lobbied for a maximum opportunity and minimum criteria for participation for all authorities as well as an open and transparent selection procedure.

Planning for success

The LGA has commissioned RBA Research to carry out a survey of local councils experience in implementing the new Local Development Framework. The LDF is the cornerstone of the new planning system's move away from strict land-use planning towards a more 'spatial' approach. The survey will identify barriers and opportunities to successful implementation and will draw up a series of case studies outlining good practice. We hope to have preliminary findings ready for an LGA conference on 27 July. The conference will assess progress

to date on implementing the new planning system and will look at the findings of a number of key projects currently in train. Policies for spatial plans, the LGA survey work on barriers and opportunities, and the POS work on the LDF learning and dissemination project are among the topics that will be reviewed. A small task group to progress projects to ensure the successful implementation of the new planning system has been set up. A cross-tier group of seven councillors will commission research, give support and momentum to joint initiatives.

House trained

The Housing Act 2004 received Royal Assent in November last year and the LGA has been working with ODPM and IDeA to facilitate the enactment of the provisions of the Act. Members will be interested to note that there will be

national training available to ensure that licensing officers are ready for the September deadline. Information will be available shortly on the details of the training and we would encourage district councils to take part.

As this is a new publication, we would welcome any feedback or ideas for future items. Please contact LGconnect on 020 7664 3131 or info@lga.gov.uk