
COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

Business Plan &

Work Programme

2025/26

The logo for the County Councils Network (CCN) is centered in the lower half of the page. It features the letters 'CCN' in a bold, dark purple font. Below the letters, the tagline 'THE VOICE OF COUNTIES' is written in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font. The logo is set against a background of intricate, light purple circuitry lines that radiate outwards from the center, creating a network-like pattern. The overall design is modern and tech-oriented, reflecting the network's focus on digital and infrastructure services.

CCN
THE VOICE OF COUNTIES

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THE VOICE OF COUNTIES

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County Councils
Network



County Councils
Network

Introduction

The County Councils Network (CCN) is the largest grouping of upper-tier authorities in England, with our councils covering 46% of England's population and 86% of its landmass.

CCN is your dedicated national representative body, articulating the priorities and policy issues that matter most to you – our 37 councils. We provide your gateway to Whitehall and Parliament, and speak on your behalf in the national media. We provide a platform for our councils to share common challenges and best practice, while representing your unique interests within the LGA.

What makes CCN the natural home for county and unitary authorities of significant size and scale, and what binds our network together, is not only the services our councils provide but the uniqueness of the places our councillors represent.

CCN is the only national voice for the county and larger unitary authorities in England, who represent the cities, towns, rural and coastal communities that make up our areas, providing a significant counterbalance to the organisations representing London and metropolitan areas.

The past twelve months have seen monumental shifts in the national political landscape, with a Labour government elected to office.

Since the General Election, the government have set out a wide-ranging reform agenda. This is impacting every aspect of local government policy, from the planning system to local government finance, adult and children's social care to devolution and local government reorganisation.

Even before voters cast their ballots in July, CCN were at the forefront of articulating both the challenges and opportunities facing councils up and down the country, and in particular, the unique places represented by county and unitary authorities.

Our *Manifesto for Counties* set out detailed proposals the network wanted the new government to adopt and then implement during this Parliament. This ambitious blueprint was supported by extensive policy development, research and advocacy delivered over the course of the of past twelve months. Throughout this business plan we set out how the network has influenced the policy proposals that emerged from the new government over the past twelve months.

We are now entering a crucial period where these proposals begin to become reality. From the outcome of the Spending Review to the conclusion of the Fair Funding Review, local government reorganisation to the Independent Review of Adult Social Care, detailed policy implementation and decisions taken by ministers will have far reaching implications for CCN member councils.

Continuing to use our *Manifesto for Counties* as the foundations of our advocacy, this Business Plan demonstrates how CCN has, and will continue to be, the Voice of England's Counties.

The network will do more than ever to place our member councils at the forefront of the national policy debate, influencing the critical decisions that lay ahead, making our voice heard on the national stage, and ensuring the best possible outcomes for our member councils and the resident they serve.



Vision

To ensure CCN is an influential and respected network, advocating innovative policy solutions on the challenges facing local government and the wider public sector.



Aim

To ensure counties have the powers and resources to meet the needs and aspirations of their residents on issues of particular importance to our councils and their communities.

Objectives

1

Influence policy at national level

Act as the voice for county and unitary councils, advocating and representing members' views across Whitehall, within the LGA, and to key influencers.

2

Produce original research & policy solutions

Produce or commission original research to support the development and advocacy of innovative policy solutions, addressing the unique demographic, financial and geographical challenges facing counties and their residents.

3

Enhance the profile of CCN

Continue to raise the profile of CCN, lead members and officers through development of strong, impactful and consistent external and internal communications alongside a targeted public affairs strategy.

4

Support member councils & share best practice

Act as a gateway to Whitehall for member councils. Share intelligence and best practice to support member councils and public sector partners to continue to be the most effective and efficient organisations in the public sector.

5

Corporate resilience

Identify strategic risks and set out organisational and financial strategies to ensure the network is resilient and sustainable over the short, medium and long term.

Your Network

CCN Executive



Cllr Tim Oliver
CCN Chairman (Con)



Cllr Barry Lewis
Vice Chair (Con) &
Finance Spokesperson



Cllr Lucy Nethsingha
Vice-Chair (Lib Dem) &
Public Health
Spokesperson



Cllr Kate Foale
Vice-Chair (Lab) &
Education & SEND
Spokesperson



Cllr Julian German
Vice-Chair (Ind) & Rural
Spokesperson



Cllr Martin Tett
Adult Social Care
Spokesperson



Cllr Roger Gough
Children's
Spokesperson



**Cllr Phillippa
Williamson**
Devolution
Spokesperson



Cllr Richard Roberts
Economic Growth
Spokesperson



Cllr Joan Dixon
Climate Change
Spokesperson



Cllr Peter Thornton
Transport
Spokesperson



Cllr Richard Clewer
Housing & Planning
Spokesperson



Cllr Linda Taylor
Unitary Spokesperson



Cllr David Hitchiner
Ind Executive Member

CCN Officers



Simon Edwards
Chief Executive



James Maker
Director of Policy &
Communications



Jonathan Rallings
Senior Policy
Advisor



Peter French
Senior Policy
Advisor



Hannah Chard
Partnership & Events
Officer



Alun Hughes
Senior Policy
Advisor



James Holden
Senior Corporate &
Public Affairs Advisor



Ian Burbidge
Senior Media &
Communications
Officer

Policy & Campaigns

During the first week of the General Election campaign, CCN published our *Manifesto for Counties*. Developed over a period of five months and originally intended to be released several months before an expected general election in November, CCN rapidly finalised the online platform during late May to engage political parties in the lead up to polling day.

Most importantly, the network fast-tracked the publication of our manifesto to ensure that immediately following the conclusion of the election, CCN would be in the best possible position to articulate our detailed asks of the government across our five priority areas and headline asks.

On July 4th the General Election was held, and a Labour government was elected. The election of a Labour government marks the first point since the network's transformation over the last decade into a prominent and effective national advocacy body that there will be governing administration without the Conservatives, either on their own or in coalition.

Building on our *Manifesto for Counties*, the network's primary focus has been on proactively influencing the rapid and fast-moving developments emanating from Whitehall across a wide-range of policy areas, reflecting the views of our member councils and publishing sector-leading research.

Alongside this, CCN has continued to support our member councils in a variety of ways, expanding even further our direct support to councils at both a member and officer level as they grapple with the day-to-day challenges they face, while positioning them to take advantage of the fresh opportunities presented by a reinvigorated national policy making agenda.

Local Government Finance

After the return of parliament following the summer recess, preparations for the new government's first Budget dominated CCN's advocacy. The Budget finally took place on 30th October, setting out departmental spending for 2025/26 and also announced a Spending Review that will set departmental spending for a further three years.

Ahead of the announcements, CCN worked closely with its member councils to develop a detailed Spending Review submission aligned with the government missions, while recognising and clearly outlining the severity of the financial challenges facing councils. Our core message within the submission was stability, investment, and reform, to enable empowered county and unitary authorities to help deliver the government's domestic agenda.

To support the network's Spending Review submission, CCN published a major new report, *The Outlook for Council Finances this Parliament*. This included new analysis by PwC and Pixel Financial Management which showed that local authorities in England faced a funding shortfall of £54bn over the next five years. County and rural unitary authorities in England represented 36%, £20.3bn, of this cumulative total. This funding gap was fuelled by rising demand and costs in just three service areas: adult social care, children's services, and home to school transport.

Building on this evidence in the lead up to the Autumn Budget, the network warned that failure to provide additional resources would leave the prospect of councils providing 'little more' than care services by the end of the decade in order to avert financial insolvency.

Following the network's advocacy, the Autumn Budget would help ease some of the financial pressures facing councils, including an extra £1.3bn in additional core funding for councils. However, there was an unexpected increase in Employers' National Insurance Contributions (NICs) and National Living Wage (NLW).

Analysis by CCN and the SCT showed that the costs of the NLW increase would be £454m next year for county and rural unitary authorities, while the direct and indirect cost of the NICs rise would amount to £488m for their councils alone.

These additional pressures were compounded by government proposals to distribute over half the new grant funding announced through a new 'Recovery Grant' that was distributed using a funding formula skewed towards urban deprivation and ability to raise council tax, alongside the unexpected ending of the Rural Services Delivery Grant.

With only two member councils receiving a share of the Recovery Grant in the provisional local government finance settlement, CCN undertook concerted advocacy to outline the adverse impact on our member councils.

Following a survey of member councils, the network warned in late January that four in five CCN member councils were now in a worse financial position than before the Budget and settlement, with councils more likely to reduce frontline services and raise council tax as a result of the government 'cherry picking' which councils to focus funding on.

With the government having a large majority, the network's advocacy was ultimately unsuccessful in securing a change in policy ahead of the confirmatory vote on allocations in the House of Commons.

However, CCN have used its interventions on the settlement as a key staging post ahead of its concerted lobbying on the Fair Funding Review, with the first consultation on the review launched in December.

In submitting a comprehensive and detailed response on behalf of its member councils during February, CCN argued that the government must ensure the review is both transparent and evidence-led, raising concerns over the direction of government policy to date. In particular, the network outlined that whilst deprivation is a factor in determining demand for services, other factors are more important in explaining council's funding pressures.

The response also made an assertive case for updating all needs-based formulae, including for adult social care and home to school transport; the need to recognise the additional costs of delivering services in rural areas; and a fair and proportionate approach to council tax equalisation.

Special Education Needs & Disabilities

CCN has been a leading advocate for special education needs and disabilities (SEND) reform for many years. However, 2024 was the year that the network made significant strides in bringing the SEND crisis engulfing local authorities to both public and, crucially, government attention.

In July, the independent report by Isos Partnership, Towards an effective and financially sustainable approach to SEND, commissioned by CCN in partnership with the LGA, provided a comprehensive diagnosis of a system that was not working for pupils, parents, schools or councils. The analysis showed that educational attainment amongst children with SEND has not improved since the introduction of landmark reforms in 2014, despite councils projected to be spending £12bn on these services by 2026, up from £4bn a decade ago.

The report argued there was a strong consensus for a more radical programme of reform, one focused on meeting the needs of more SEND children in mainstream education. The report recommended the new government invests in building capacity in mainstream schools to meet children's needs, establishing a new 'national framework' for SEND and 'Local Inclusion Partnerships' to enable more effective assessments, commissioning and collaboration between councils, schools and health.

The report received extensive media coverage and has been widely welcomed across local government, schools and health, and some SEN parents' organisations. The report has led to CCN being invited to present to civil servants and government advisors within days of the new Government being elected, and CCN has continued to work closely with government since then as they develop their reform programme.

While the report has been well received and we expect government to set out reforms to the SEND system in the coming weeks, the network has continued to maintain the momentum on the desperate need for reform, and in particular, use the Spending Review to set out a solution to how the government plans to manage high-needs deficits when the statutory override ends in March 2026.

New CCN analysis published in October showed that rising demand and costs has resulted in England's 38 county and largest unitary authorities in England amassing unmanageable SEND deficits of £2bn this year, a figure projected to rise to £2.7bn in 2025/26. Nationally, these deficits are now estimated to be £4bn this year, growing to £5.9bn next year. CCN warned that as a result of these deficits, twenty-six of England's largest councils could have to declare bankruptcy by 2027 if the multi-billion SEND deficits they are grappling with are placed onto their budget books.

Five Simple Principles Underpinning CCN's Advocacy

1

Selective

Focusing on the key policy areas that are most important to members and have a unique county angle.

2

Pragmatic

Measured campaigning defending and raising concerns of members while maintaining good relationships and access to ministers.

3

Evidence-based

Increasing the portfolio of policy development and research undertaken by the organisation.

4

Politically aware

Recognising the political dynamics of our membership and Whitehall, while maintaining a cross-party approach.

5

Adaptive

Proactively responding to developments and adapting our policy development and work programme.

Children's Services

Over the past twelve months, the network's advocacy on children's services has been front and centre of our engagement with the new government. In particular, CCN has focused its advocacy on the spiralling costs of children's care placements, which as our Spending Review submission outlined is one of the single biggest driver of costs facing councils.

The report, *The Way We Care*, produced in conjunction with IMPOWER and published at CCN Conference in November provided key analysis of how these costs have grown in recent years, and in particular showing how the cost of placements does not correlate directly to the needs of children.

The report showed that since 2019, there has been a 45% increase in young people being cared for in children's homes and supported accommodation, an increase of over 4,500 individuals. Councils spent £6.6bn on children in care last year and the report projected that local authorities will be spending almost double this amount – £12bn – in just six years' time if nothing changes.

Building on the report's findings, the new government has already signalled its intent to make sweeping changes to children's social care provision. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill currently passing through parliament contains a range of reforms to children's social care including addressing dysfunction in the care placement market. In response to these reforms, CCN strongly welcomed the proposals put forward, which would go some way to helping to address placement costs and wider pressures within the system.

Home to School Transport

The challenges facing the delivery of home to school transport, and in particular the rising costs of SEND travel services, remain critical to CCN member councils. In late March 2024, building on research published in November 2023 by Isos Partnership, CCN used further analysis to highlight the disproportionate cost implications for county and rural authorities and the case for reforming provision.

CCN analysis of a BBC freedom of information request showed that the cost of providing SEND home to school transport had doubled in county areas since 2019, from £387m to £790m in 2023/24, with these councils spending an average of £9,800 per year on each child receiving SEND school transport. The analysis also showed that county and rural councils transport double the amount of SEND pupils on average (2,458), compared to the rest of the country, a 45% increase on the 2018/19 average of 1,694 pupils per county and rural council.

In November, CCN developed a report with IMPOWER looking at ways councils can reduce their spending. The organisation has also continued to lobby government on the need to develop targeted reforms and a new formula to distribute funding to help address the spiralling costs faced by our member authorities.

Adult Social Care & Health

CCN placed ensuring sustainable reform at the heart of our early engagement with the new government, and in particular, seeking immediate clarity on the future introduction of charging reform.

Support to member councils

At a glance.....

Policy development & research

CCN produces research and responds to government consultations, putting forward a strong evidence base to government. This year we produced 12 policy and research publications across a wider range of policy areas, which have collectively been downloaded over 35,000 times.



...publications, consultations & submissions in 2024/25



.....media stories & articles
a 54% annual increase

Media & Communications

With our well established media profile, CCN is the voice for counties in the national press and on prime-time TV and radio, alongside a constant presence in the trade press and journals. CCN has had our most successful year to date, including 291 national media hits across all outlets.

Public Affairs & Engagement

Through our public affairs support CCN is the gateway to Whitehall and Parliament for member councils, while building strong relationships with stakeholders across the local government, public and private sectors. Over the past 12 months we continued to provide evidence to select committees and contribute to national events.



...meetings with members of the House of Commons and Lords.

During the election campaign, and with the aim of influencing the incoming government's policy direction, the network had already engaged its strategic partner Newton to update existing research on the costs and workforce requirements of implementing a new cap on care and extended means-test by the October 2025 'go live' date.

In July, CCN and Newton published the findings of the updated modelling in a new report, showing that the costs of the proposed reforms had increased by a third – with the total costs of the reforms for older adults totalling £30bn over the next decade. Because of these funding concerns, the report showed that almost nine in ten (86%) of CCN councils said they were not well prepared for the reforms, with nine in ten (92%) also supporting a delay of at least a year or more.

With CCN outlining that the costs of the reforms were 'completely unfunded' and warning it would be impossible to put in place the workforce requirements to implement the reforms by October 2025, the network reluctantly called for a further delay in implementation. Following these calls, later in July, the government announced that they would not be proceeding with the reforms this parliament.

Whilst CCN welcomed this decision, we have since been disappointed by the lack of any concrete alternative plans. Whilst the expectation had been that more detail would be provided about the 'National Care Service' trailed before the election, it was instead announced in January that social care will be subject to a new four-year Independent Commission to determine long-term strategic reform. This Commission will be chaired by Baroness Louise Casey and the intent is for it to achieve a reform plan to underpin the National Care Service.

However, in the absence of firm government proposals for reform, CCN has continued to seek to influence the national debate on the future of adult social care in England. In November, CCN published the latest in its series of reports with Newton, *The Forgotten Story of Social Care*, highlighting the needs of Working Age Adults.

The report revealed that the costs of providing care for these individuals is now far outpacing social care to the over 65s, with two-thirds of adult social care commissioning budgets dedicated to working age and lifelong disabled adults. The report warned increased complexity of individual needs, a substantial rise in placement costs, and inappropriate and insufficient housing options could mean councils' care and support spending for these individuals could top £17bn by 2030 – a 50% increase compared to 2024.

The report has received widespread support from across the sector, including the Social Care Minister, who spoke at the launch of the analysis during the CCN Annual Conference, with a second phase report to be launched in the autumn of 2025.

Whilst the future of social care reform remains in the balance, the government has started the process of developing a new ten year plan for health reform, based on the findings of Lord Darzi's Independent Review. The new plan will be centred around three key 'shifts' identified by the Secretary of State – loosely defined as 'hospital to community', 'analogue to digital', and 'treatment to prevention'.

CCN has been in regular contact with colleagues from the NHS during the present consultation period, feeding in to various issues including commissioning frameworks and the ongoing development of Integrated Care Systems. The full ten-year plan is expected to be finalised later this year.



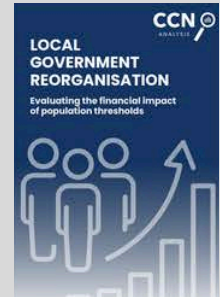
Key publications & research 2024/25

Utilising our dedicated commissioning budget, CCN commissions a range of external research, resulting in the publication of several major independent reports. CCN worked with the most established consultancy and research organisations this year.

COMMISSIONED RESEARCH

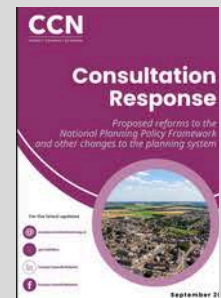


CCN Analysis and County Spotlight publications are internally produced research reports published throughout the year. They seek to provide the latest data analysis and policy commentary on local economies, service demand, council finances and the wider public sector landscape.



With the election of a new government and a reinvigorated national policy making agenda, there has been a significant increase in the number of formal government consultations and parliamentary select committee inquiries that CCN has needed to respond to on behalf of member councils.

CONSULTATIONS



Housing & Planning

Housing and planning reform has continued to dominate the political conversation over the last year and soon after last year's General Election, the new Deputy Prime Minister used a speech to announce the Government's intention to publish a long-term housing strategy.

The speech set out the intention to undertake significant planning reforms, reintroduce mandatory housing targets, and acknowledged the need for stability in social rent housing policy. This included an ambitious direction of travel to reform the planning system to enable the delivery of 1.5 million homes over the course of this Parliament.

Within 26 days of getting into office, the Government issued a revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for consultation and this was published alongside new housing targets that were calculated under a new standard method.

Following extensive engagement with member councils and a survey on their views on the reforms, in September [CCN released new research](#) showing that the new standard method will have a significant impact on county areas, with an average increase of 56% across county areas. This equates to an additional 64,769 new homes per year, or 1,245 per week.

With the revised NPPF reversing some of the changes made by the previous government, and reintroducing the requirement to maintain a rolling five-year supply of land, CCN argued that their communities face a developer 'free for all' and could be left at the mercy of speculative housing development under the government's flagship plans to reform the planning system.

While our research showed that seven in ten county and rural unitary councils supported the principle of nationally set targets, not one respondent said they supported the government's new target for their county area, and over nine in ten respondents (94%) said the targets were excessive.

Some nine in ten county and unitary councils were also concerned that their areas will be more at risk of speculative development.

Despite this public advocacy and CCN submitting a comprehensive response warning of the impact that the new targets could have on county areas, particularly in relation to the pressure it will place on already overstretched infrastructure, the new housing targets were implemented, and these are now a mandatory starting point when preparing Local Plans.

Separately, in December, the long-awaited English Devolution White Paper was published bringing with it confirmation of the reintroduction of a 'universal system of strategic planning' with all areas, regardless of mayoral or devolution status, to prepare a Spatial Development Framework within a defined timeframe.

This is something that the network has been calling for a number of years and [we strongly welcomed](#) the government taking this forward.

Alongside this, CCN also supported the government decision not to take forward the Infrastructure Levy that had been legislated for by the previous Government in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. Instead we have advocated that the government listen to the call of CCN and works with members to reform the existing system of developer contributions. This is something that was contained in the Labour manifesto but has not yet been forthcoming.

Transport & Climate Change

Making Britain a clean energy superpower through delivering clean power by 2030 was one of Labour's five missions, and one that they certainly have set out to deliver. The 'Mission Control for Clean Power' unit was set up within the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in July 2024, and December last year saw the publication of the Clean Power Action Plan 2030.

Key to lowering carbon emissions across county areas is improving public transport and providing infrastructure to support the take-up of electric vehicles. In November, CCN members received an injection of funding for rural bus services when £1bn of funding was announced. Following concerted advocacy on the need for a fairer distribution of resources, CCN strongly welcomed our members receiving 55% of the new funding allocations. CCN also supported the continuation of the single fare cap, although outlined that the raise from £2 to £3 would impact county residents disproportionately.

The Bus Services Bill was introduced in December 2024 with the aim of giving local transport authorities more control over routes, timetables, connections and fares, and lifts the ban on authorities establishing their own bus companies.

In response, CCN has argued that bus franchising is not a sustainable panacea for bus services in county areas due to the higher running costs and reduced economies of scale that can be achieved with services in country areas, and will continue to make this case.

The Planning & Infrastructure Bill published earlier this month makes provisions for faster consenting for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects along with energy provision. It also makes provisions for increased roll out of infrastructure for electric vehicles – this is welcome given CCN's research published by the network showing that county areas are lagging behind in terms of the rollout of electric charging points, and that take-up of electric cars is lower compared to other areas.

Finally, the waste reforms introduced through the Environment Bill continue to be implemented. Ahead of the government announcing funding allocations for the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme, CCN has worked with stakeholders to ensure that the county perspective is heard.

In October, the network published new research with the LGA outlining new analysis showing that 5.6 million tonnes of packaging waste was binned by households last year, with CCN and the LGA calling on the reforms to reduce packaging and make it easier to recycle, alongside ensuring that all changes are fully funded.

Devolution

The final months of the previous administration saw a flurry of activity in this policy area. The March 2024 Budget announced 'Level 2' devolution agreements for Buckinghamshire, Warwickshire and Surrey, taking the total number of deals amongst CCN members up to 15 at that stage.

The election campaign that followed saw CCN asking for the momentum to be maintained by whoever won power and the continuation of the devolution agenda.

Following the election result, the new government pledged to kickstart what they described as a 'devolution revolution' and invited areas without an agreement in place to submit proposals by the end of September 2024. In doing so, the new government's approach supported CCN's pre-election *Manifesto for Counties* call for every county area that has not agreed a deal given the opportunity to do so by 2027.

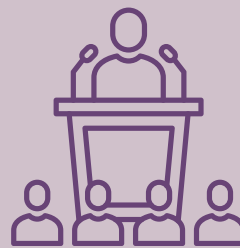
The English Devolution White Paper was published on 16 December. This contained a new, more ambitious, devolution framework with an enhanced set of powers, and an aim to see mayoral devolution delivered across England. The enhanced powers contained in the framework reflected many of the proposals put forward by the network in our *Manifesto for Counties*.

Support to member councils

At a glance.....

Events & Conference

CCN have delivered a range of events, providing the opportunity to profile our major projects, engage ministers and other high-profile speakers on key policy issues. CCN's Annual Conference 2024 in November was another major success.



.....online and in person set-piece events on a range of policy subjects.



.....virtual meetings for Leaders, CCN Council and Chief Executives.

Meetings & advisory

The use of improved video conferencing technology has dramatically increased our contact with member councils through regular Leaders & Chief Executives virtual meetings. CCN is also providing more bespoke expert advice and intelligence gathering for individual councils across a range of policy areas.

ACCE & Officer Groups

Alongside our dedicated support to the Association of County Chief Executives, CCN has five officer groups covering a range of policy areas, providing senior officers in our member councils access to policy makers and national influencers. Moving these meetings online has dramatically increased the level of attendance and engagement.



...dedicated officer group meetings across corporate policy, adults, children's, place and devolution.

In response to the publication CCN welcomed the ambition shown by government and the clear direction of travel set out. Building on engagement with member councils, CCN highlighted that while non-mayoral devolution should rightly remain an option, most member councils were now willing to embrace the mayoral model.

Importantly, however, CCN also argued that whilst member councils recognise the opportunities presented by the creation of new strategic authorities and more powers for mayors, the role of local authorities should be enhanced and not diminished; with a clear separation between mayors in spearheading an area's strategic growth and constituent councils in delivering day-to-day essential local services such as social care.

Following the publication of the White Paper, the network has been extremely active in supporting member councils to put forward applications for the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP), ahead of the January 10th deadline, while keeping members consistently up-to-date with the latest developments.

A programme of dedicated support was put in place within weeks of the announcement at both member and officer level. This will form the basis of our support moving forward to both those areas selected for DPP, and our wider membership as they continue to develop proposals over the coming months.

Local Government Reorganisation

Contained within the White Paper was also confirmation of the government's intention to move forward on a programme of local government reorganisation in the remaining two-tier areas, alongside small neighbouring unitary authorities.

With an increasing number of county areas successfully reorganising to create unitary authorities over the past decade, our network has always been open to the prospect of reform. The willingness of our member councils to embrace the agenda was demonstrated clearly by their applications for both the Devolution Priority Programme and fast-track reorganisation.

In the lead up to the publication of the White Paper, CCN spent many weeks engaging individual councils on their views on reorganisation, alongside detailed engagement with senior officials as they developed proposals.

Through this engagement, CCN were advocated for a clear direction of travel on local government reorganisation. Alongside this, CCN argued that ministers needed to set out a transparent set of criteria to ensure a coherent and structured process that can create authorities of the necessary size and scale, including a substantial minimum population criteria and supporting guidance that ensured the unnecessary fragmentation of social care services.

CCN strongly welcomed the government listening to our advocacy in the approach they have set out in both the White Paper and the statutory guidance issued to local areas. Moreover, the criteria contained in the invitation issued to all areas provides a comprehensive set of statutory guidance to help local areas put forward sustainable and credible proposals for reform, including a minimum population of 500,000 or more.

From the outset of the government's agenda, CCN has outlined that it will not be dogmatic over whether an area chooses to reform into one or more unitary authority. It is ultimately up to local areas to choose which option to pursue, considering both the financial implications and other impact factors. They must do so mindful of the costs and risks involved in the reorganisation process.

As such, ahead of the initial deadline of March 21st for Interim Plan, CCN has focused on supporting an evidence-based approach to reform that aids local areas to make informed decisions. This is alongside a programme of support at member and officer level, mirroring the arrangements and working groups put in place for devolution.

In early March, CCN published updated financial analysis by PwC on the benefits and costs of local government reorganisation. Delivered for CCN at no cost to the organisation, this included providing every two-tier area with a high-level savings profile from different approaches to reform within their area.

Using the updated PwC financial analysis, CCN published its own report on the impact of different population thresholds on proposals for reorganisation. This was aimed at supporting the national policy direction, demonstrating the necessity of the government criteria that new unitary authorities cover at least 500,000 people.

Separately, working with Pixel Financial Management, CCN developed a financial disaggregation tool exclusively for CCN member councils, allowing areas test the potential funding base of different unitary formations within their areas. Alongside this, CCN has facilitated research by Newton on the impact of reorganisation on people-based services, with individual areas contributing to the research receiving a bespoke analysis for their areas.

Public Affairs

The past twelve months in CCN's public affairs activity was marked by a seismic shift in the political composition of MPs within county areas. Some 335 new MPs were elected to parliament, and the national swing was largely replicated across CCN areas, with 176 new MPs, including 106 from Labour.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, CCN held a hugely successful Local Government Summer Reception with the LGIU in Westminster on the day of the King's Speech. It was attended by over 200 councillors, senior officers, and local government stakeholders, including 14 MPs and five members of the House of Lords.

Since then CCN have worked hard to build relationships with new ministers and MPs to ensure that they are aware of the key pressures affecting members, and the areas where the network is looking to MPs to lobby on their behalf. MPs and Peers have been regularly sent briefings on key developments, alongside our regular MPs Newsletter containing updates on CCN research. Officers have also met with new MPs throughout the year to gain a sense of what the priorities are for the new intake.

This has shown that many MPs are concerned about council finances and keen to understand more about how the upcoming Fair Funding Review will impact on their areas. Another key area for MPs has been SEND, which has been regularly raised in parliament during the year. CCN supported a briefing for MPs held with the f40 group of England's lowest funded education authorities.

SEND is also one of the areas where CCN has been called to give oral evidence to select committees since the General Election. Over the past year, CCN has also given oral evidence on devolution in England, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and the financial sustainability of local authorities. This underscores the value that parliamentarians place in CCN's research and advocacy on behalf of members.

For our member councils, CCN continues to use our monthly Leaders' Calls, meeting of the Association of County Chief Executives and Council meetings to provide important engagement opportunities with ministers and officials. CCN also coordinates a number of senior officer forums, covering corporate policy, adults, children's, place, devolution and local government reorganisation.

In November, CCN were delighted to host another successful conference, welcoming almost 200 delegates, strategic partners and speakers to the Crowne Plaza at Marlow.

The high-profile speakers included the Local Government Minister Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, Shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government Kevin Hollinrake MP, government SEND Advisor Dame Christine Lenahan and the Royal Society of the Arts Chief Executive Andy Haldane.

CCN also had a stand at the LGA Annual Conference in October, and team members attended UKREiif in May and NCASC in November.

CCN events & meetings



Receptions



Parliamentary engagement



Roundtables



CCN Annual Conference

Media & Communications

The network had its best-ever year for media coverage in 2024/25, securing almost 4,000 pieces of coverage. The network's total for the calendar year was 3,939: a 54% increase on 2023/24. Of that number 291 pieces of coverage were from the national press, which represents a 16% year on year increase.

The network achieved this by building on its extensive contacts book within the media, and building new relationships with journalists.

As a result, the network has helped shape and lead the debate on local government finance, adult social care reform, the pressures in SEND services and planning reform within the national press. The network has managed to secure more pieces of coverage on the Press Association, which has its copy syndicated to most local newspapers in England, meaning CCN's lobbying is being read by local residents as well as a national audience.

With a new government in place and as part of Autumn Budget advocacy, the network released its new report on the funding challenge facing local government over the course of this Parliament. That report received over 150 pieces of coverage, including Sky News, the Financial Times, and The Telegraph. A follow-up story a few weeks later on SEND pressures for county and unitary councils was covered by ITV Evening News, and 40 other outlets.

Other CCN media campaigns have been successful, including advocacy last summer about the costs of the planned social care charging reforms. CCN's analysis received 40 pieces of coverage, including The Guardian, The Times, and the Telegraph and helped contribute to the government pausing the reforms.

The network has also achieved significant coverage of its March 2024 housing report, including BBC Breakfast News, its regular council tax tracker which received over 50 pieces of coverage, and its concerns over housing and infrastructure reforms, which received wide-spread national media coverage.

Complimenting our national media profile is CCN's longstanding relationships with the local government trade press, including contributing regular editorials and proactive comments on policy developments to both the Municipal Journal and the Local Government Chronicle

Last year was also unique in that CCN set up a dedicated and interactive microsite in the lead-up to the general election. The *Manifesto for Counties* website was effectively a digital manifesto where users could easily read CCN's policy positions ahead of the election, with content subsequently updated to reflect the present. To date, the microsite has had almost 7,000 users since its launch in May and the two most popular policy pages were CCN's manifesto for adult social care and CCN's manifesto for devolution and reform.

The network's main website and social media also continue to grow. The CCN website received 130,000 views in 2024, up 9% on 2023. A total of 61,000 users visited the site over those twelve months, up 11% year-on-year.

LinkedIn has become CCN's prime social media channel, and over 1,500 extra people followed the network's page in 2024. Content posted on LinkedIn received over 222,000 impressions throughout the year (the number of people who read or saw a particular post). Over the same timeframe, posts on CCN's X account received just over 200,000 impressions.

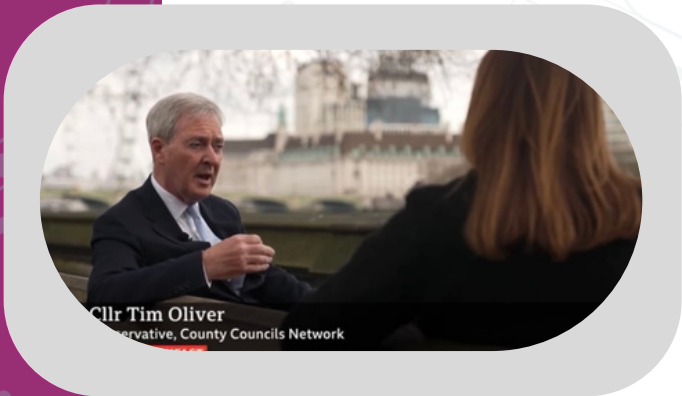
CCN in the media



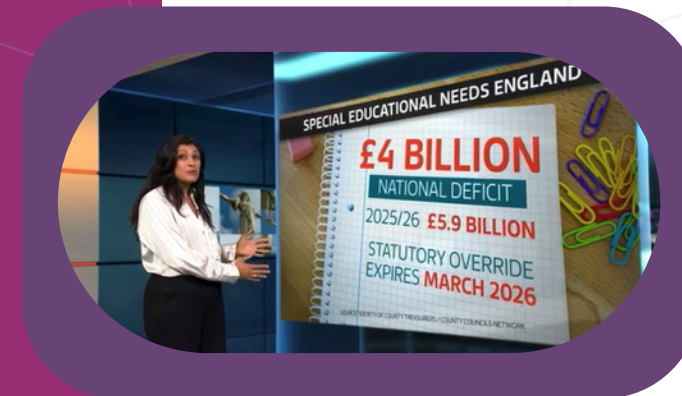
Cllr Tim Oliver, Sky News



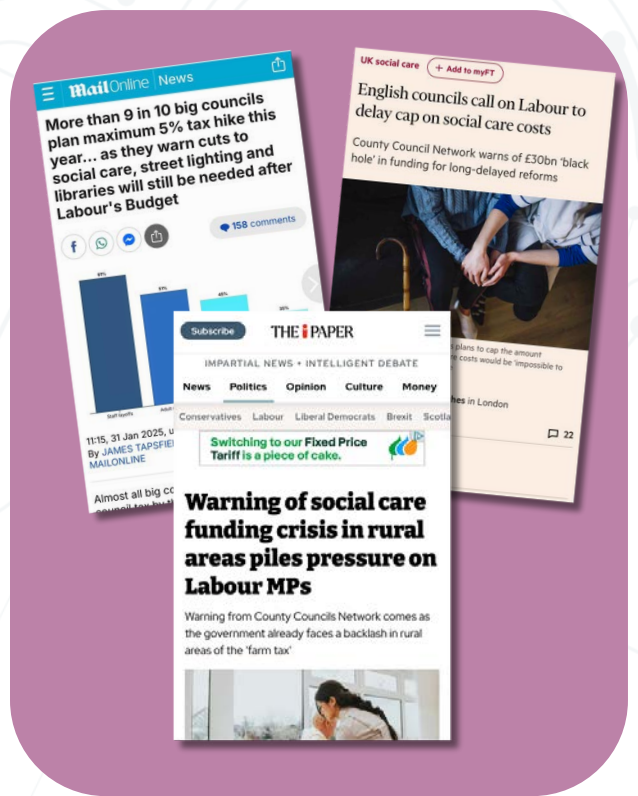
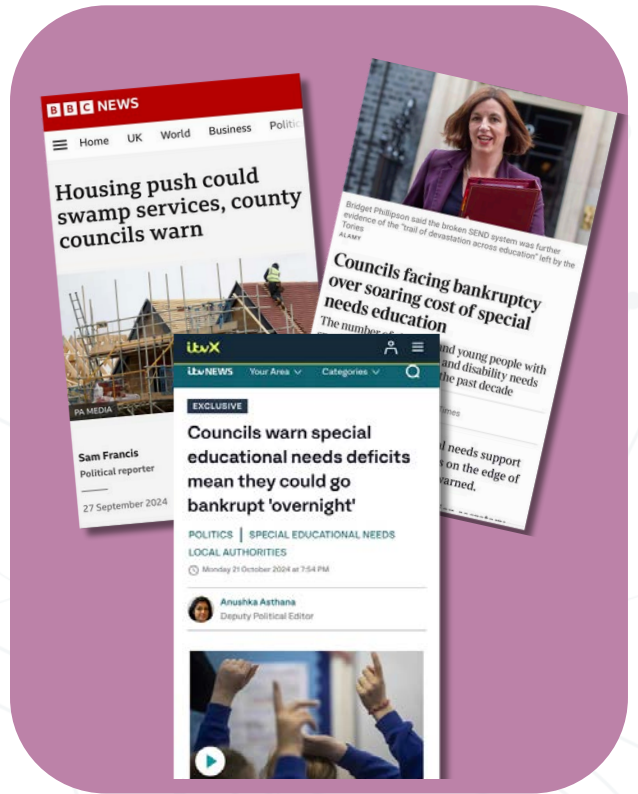
Cllr Richard Clewer, BBC Countryfile



Cllr Tim Oliver, BBC News



SEND analysis on ITV News



Policy Development

Built on months of detailed engagement with our member councils in the lead up to the General Election, and updated in November 2024 to reflect the policy agenda set out by the government, the *Manifesto for Counties* continues to articulate the network's policy priorities and overarching strategic vision.

For the coming period, our Work Programme continues to use the manifesto's four cross-cutting foundations, five policy priorities and associated work-streams as the strategic framework for CCN's policy development for the coming year. Following May's local elections, and the resulting reconstitution and recalculation of the network's political balance and Executive membership, this will be reviewed ahead of the Annual General Meeting in September.

In developing our Work Programme for 2025/26, CCN has closely examined the national policy landscape and the unrelenting pace of developments as the government seeks to undertake a range of reforms that will have significant implications for CCN member councils.

While much of the network's advocacy since the Election has focused on influencing the *direction of travel* and emerging proposals, there are many areas of policy, such as funding reform, planning, devolution and local government reorganisation, where the government are now moving to implementation.

Equally, however, it is important to recognise that in some policy areas, such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and adult social care reform, the government to date have not set out firm proposals for implementation.

CCN will therefore continue to prioritise our national advocacy above all other CCN related activity, recognising the need to balance detailed engagement on active policy implementation and support for member councils, with continuing to produce sector-leading research that shapes and influences the wider local government agenda.

Critical to this is ensuring that the support provided to member councils on local government reorganisation does not distract from our core policy work and commissioning on critical agendas such as the Fair Funding Review, planning reform and social care, while recognising half our member councils are already unitary authorities.

Our core policy team will be expanded, prioritising additional capacity to support our policy development and expertise in adult social care and health policy. Alongside this, CCN will invest in further analytical support to increase our internal capacity and expertise for regular data analysis. Moreover, recognising recent and future expansion of CCN's unitary membership, the network will increase its dedicated policy work in relation to lower tier/unitary services.

CCN will invest significant resources towards detailed policy development through government-led consultations and forthcoming legislation. This will build directly on extensive engagement CCN policy leads are already undertaking across Whitehall departments.

However, it will also necessitate investing additional resources in securing external expertise to support this policy development and associated advocacy to secure the most positive outcome possible for our member councils.

Alongside this, CCN must continue to expand our support to member councils to enable them to engage directly with government through dedicated senior officer groups on these reform programmes, while also facilitating and commissioning research to understand the implications of the proposals on local areas.

Public Affairs

The network's public affairs activity forms a critical part of CCN's overall strategy to influence the government's agenda and position the views of our member councils at the centre of Whitehall policy making.

With an unprecedented turnover of Members of Parliament last year, the network will look to consolidate and build upon our engagement with parliamentarians since the General Election, creating a strong advocacy base for CCN policy. CCN will continue to build new relationships with MPs and Peers from across both houses, and ensure that the network is plugged in to the frontbench teams.

With legislation being taken forward on planning and infrastructure, and devolution, CCN will work with MPs and Peers at each stage of each bill's passage, so that they are aware of the sections that CCN are supportive of; and working to build support for amendments where aspects of the bills run counter to the interests of CCN's members or the communities that they represent.

More widely, across the most critical policy areas, CCN will enhance our regular contact with members through briefings, our dedicated MPs newsletter and hold regular in-person meetings that provide an opportunity for CCN to provide the information MPs need to raise concerns with ministers and support CCN policy campaigns.

This will be especially critical as the Fair Funding Review proceeds over the course of year. CCN will be focussing on ensuring that MPs understand the resulting proposals and advocate for any changes needed to ensure that county and unitary council finances are not adversely impacted by any changes the government makes.

CCN will continue to offer members an expanded programme of on-line events and roundtables throughout the year, as well as in-person opportunities.

Our Annual Parliamentary Reception will be held in September, providing an opportunity for members to engage with MPs, Peers and key stakeholders. This will compliment other events that CCN will hold over the course of the year, such as hosting a stand and reception at the LGA Annual Conference in Liverpool in July, and providing regular contact for senior councillors with ministers, officials and stakeholders through Council meetings and our monthly calls for CCN Leaders.

And of course, CCN will be holding its Annual Conference from 16th – 18th November. Officers will again be working hard to put together an agenda mixing high-profile speakers with informative content, and will be seeking to take the look and feel of the conference to the next level through a new AV provider.

Media & Communications

At the most critical time for its member councils, CCN's media and communications strategy will continue to position the network as the voice for county and rural areas in the press and as the main go-to organisation for all local government issues.

Over the next twelve months, CCN will cement its position in securing national media coverage for major research and advocacy reports, alongside its regular presence in the lead up to major fiscal and policy statements.

To achieve this, the CCN will continue to develop compelling analysis and stories to secure coverage. With CCN now an established presence across all main broadcasters, online and printed national media, the team will create new relationships with journalists and expand its profile to new and emerging media outlets. The network will also seek to increase the number of on-the-day responses to policy announcements, building on its strong network of connections and recognisable brand name.

With the CCN website last updated in 2014, the network be seeking to refresh this critical platform this year, building on the launch of the *Manifesto for Counties* microsite in May 2024. This update would seek to make the website more modern, readable, and more easily navigable. The team will be exploring options for an update in the first half of 2025/26.

The network will consolidate and improve its reach across its main social media platforms LinkedIn and X, but also will consider expanding out to other forms of social media in order to get CCN's advocacy in front of a wider audience.

CCN will continue to publish its highly successful County Spotlight reports every three months, featuring a wide range of new policy areas beyond our key strategic priorities to demonstrate the wide-range of important services our member councils provide for local communities.

Over recent years the network have professionalised our output across all media formats, in particular our ability to produce in-house branding and marketing materials, alongside video content. The network will produce more in-house videos for both its website and social media, including of CCN spokespeople and officers giving their reaction to latest policy developments and announcements to get the network's messages across a wider set of viewers.

As well as more on-the-day reaction, the network will seek to increase the number of third-party blogs for its website, in order to provide a wider variety of content and subjects for county and unitary councils.



Foundation 1 Sustainable long-term funding

Local government finances have never been under so much pressure. After almost a decade of austerity and rising demand for services, the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have placed further strain on already stretched budgets.

While recent short-term increases in funding have been welcome, this has only met some of the additional costs of growing demand and historically high inflation – failing to address the structural underfunding of councils.

The new government must set out a sustainable multi-year funding settlement for councils at the forthcoming Spending Review. Alongside this, funding reform must deliver an evidence-based, transparent and fair outcome, ensuring no council receives an unsustainable reduction in resources.



Foundation 2 An agenda for reform

Funding alone, however, will not be sufficient to secure a sustainable future for local government and the essential services residents and businesses rely on.

There needs to be a comprehensive review of councils' statutory responsibilities to ensure that the duties and regulations placed on councils enable local authorities to provide services in line with local needs and the funding envelope available to them.

Building on the reforms it has set out since July, CCN will continue to work with the government to deliver far-reaching reforms to the delivery of public services which can improve outcomes and drive down costs, particularly in adult social care, children's services, SEND and home to school transport.



Foundation 3 Localising & devolving

Local government is at the heart of every community. It provides the services that people rely on, the housing and infrastructure that builds communities, and the support to local business that can drive national prosperity.

The government must maintain a presumption of 'local first', ensuring that those services currently delivered by county and unitary authorities remain under their remit and are enabled to thrive.

CCN are committed to working with the government to deliver the ambitions of the Devolution White Paper, enabling all areas to achieve a devolution deal by the end of this parliament. This must include an evidence-based approach to reorganisation, delivering sustainable new unitary councils with the necessary scale.



Foundation 4 Tackling climate change & net-zero

Mitigating and adapting to climate change and delivering net zero is one of the biggest challenges of our generation.

As local place-leaders, councils are already working tirelessly to reduce their carbon footprint and encourage behaviour change.

However, as the proposals across our *Manifesto for Counties* show, tackling climate change will require a long-term strategic approach, supported by policies tailored to local needs.

The government must move away from an overly city-focused approach and work in partnership with local government across the country to deliver place-based solutions that respond to the challenges they face and opportunities delivering net zero present.

LOCAL

GOVERNMENT

FINANCE



WORKSTREAM 1

Financial Pressures



WORKSTREAM 2

Funding Reform



WORKSTREAM 3

Service Reform

OUR APPROACH

The coming twelve months is shaping up to be the most important in over a decade for local government finance. Not only will the government finalise its first multi-year spending review in the spring, it will complete the previously stalled Fair Funding Review, introducing updated allocations for the 2026/27 settlement.

After eight years of successive one-year settlements, CCN has long argued for greater stability through a multi-year funding settlement. Moreover, CCN has been an advocate for fairer funding, recognising our member councils are the lowest funded types of authorities.

However, with our research showing that four in five CCN member councils are worse-off as result of last year's budget and the allocation decisions contained in the 2025/26 settlement, our member councils are rightly concerned over the outcome of both the spending and Fair Funding Reviews.

The network's advocacy on local government finance will therefore be the primary focus over the coming 12 months. Building on recent advocacy in response to the local government settlement and our research conducted over the past year, CCN will work with the wider sector to make the strongest case possible for a sustainable quantum of funding to meet rising cost and demand-led pressures facing councils over the remainder of this parliament.

However, equally important to the overall quantum of funding is the distribution of any new resources. It is vital that the Fair Funding Review is a genuine evidence-based assessment of councils needs and that the spending review delivers the funding needed to ensure the outcome of the review does not lead to a disproportionate or unsustainable reduction in funding for parts of the sector.

Through public-facing advocacy and research, CCN must continue to demonstrate the scale and uniqueness of the funding challenge facing our member councils, beyond the government's narrow focus on deprivation. Alongside this, it must engage extensively with every stage of the Fair Funding Review, ensuring the views of our member councils are clearly articulated.

This will necessitate the delivery of robust analysis and engagement with Senior Officials, working closely with Society of County Treasurers (SCT). CCN has formed an expert joint CCN, Association of County Chief Executives (ACCE) and SCT Fair Funding Review Steering Group to oversee the development of our activity and engagement with the Fair Funding Review. This includes jointly commissioning additional support from Pixel Financial Management to advise and support the group.

More widely, CCN will engage extensively with proposed reforms to New Homes Bonus and the business rates reset, while continuing to be a leading voice on the critical importance of delivering a solution to high-needs deficits ahead of the end of the statutory override in March 2026.



SPENDING REVIEW

Support the local government sector in continuing to make the case for sustainable resources and an increased quantum of funding for all councils at the three year spending, with focused research, advocacy and engagement in the lead up to the spring announcement.



BUDGET PRESSURES

CCN will continue to articulate the financial pressures facing local government and county authorities through regular budget surveys and detailed analysis of revenue and capital expenditure data throughout the year. These will be primarily focused in the lead up to, and after, key announcements such as the Spending Review, Autumn Budget, and Provisional and Final local government settlements.



FUNDING REFORM - CONSULTATIONS & ENGAGEMENT

Engage extensively with all stages of the Fair Funding Review and wider reforms to local government finance. This includes providing effective representation for the network at Leaders Council and cross-sector MHCLG Local Government Funding Reform Group, engagement with Members of Parliament, alongside collaborative advocacy through the Joint CCN, ACCE and SCT Fair Funding Review Steering Group.



FUNDING REFORM - MODELLING

Through our enhanced retainer with Pixel Financial Management, undertake detailed analysis and modelling on the implications of the Fair Funding Review for CCN member councils. This includes providing member councils with regular insights on the potential distribution to ensure councils can understand the impact and support CCN advocacy.



FUNDING REFORM - COUNCIL TAX AND BUSINESS RATES

Engage extensively with Fair Funding Review proposals for council tax equalisation and the reset to business rates, ensuring a fair and proportionate approach for all CCN member councils. Alongside this, engage with, and respond to, the government's proposals for reform to New Homes Bonus, while advocating for greater flexibility on council tax referendum principles and wider fiscal devolution.



HIGH NEEDS DEFICITS

Working with the SCT and wider sector, CCN will continue to undertake extensive advocacy in relation to high-needs deficits. This will include updating existing projections on the scale of deficits over the coming years with the best available data and engaging with government on potential solutions ahead of the Statutory Override ending in March 2026.



PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

Engage with developments on the Public Sector Reform and Innovation Fund and role of Councils, Strategic Authorities and Mayors in place-based public service reform. Position county and unitary authorities as the lead body for driving whole-place public service reform. Undertake research, analysis and engagement with member councils to support arguments in favour of public sector reform and collaboration at county scale and reforms that simplify and integrate wider public service providers.



WELFARE SUPPORT

Engage CCN member councils on the next round of Household Support Fund and undertake further national advocacy to demonstrate how councils are using funds to support local communities with the cost living. Make the case for a further extension of the fund as part of the Spending Review.

ADULT

SOCIAL CARE

& HEALTH



WORKSTREAM 1

Adult social care



WORK STREAM 2

Working age adults



WORKSTREAM 3

Integration & public health

OUR APPROACH

The Independent Commission into Adult Social Care led by Baroness Louise Casey will shape much of the organisation's policy development, research and advocacy on social care across the coming year.

Although further details on its scope are yet to be published, the first phase, reporting in 2026, will identify the critical issues facing adult social care and set out recommendations to lay the foundations for a 'national care service'. The second phase, reporting by 2028, will make longer-term recommendations, including the model of care, how services should be organised, and the funding arrangements to underpin this.

Building on our existing research on adult social care, established relationships with senior officials and the recruitment of additional policy expertise, CCN will seek to engage extensively with the first phase of the review. This will reflect our members' views that councils remain at the heart of a locally delivered social care system, advocating for social care reform which is achievable, but most crucially, sustainably funded to meet rising costs and demand for services.

As part of this, CCN will be proceeding with the second phase of its project around working age adults with Newton. Building on the first report, the next phase will work with our member authorities to identify innovative policy and practice. Alongside this, CCN will undertake new research on the importance of housing services to improved outcomes in social care.

On health integration, the forthcoming Ten Year Plan for the NHS presents another important development as the ongoing fusion of strategic health and social care seems set to continue. Integrated Care Systems (ICS) will continue to operate within the NHS consolidating the moves towards greater alignment of health and social care over the past decade, alongside a potentially enhanced role through the abolishment of NHS England.

As these bodies mature, local government engagement and representation will continue to be of great importance, both within the delivery of social as well as public health. In particular the three key 'shifts' for health reform – 'hospital to community', 'treatment to prevention' and 'analogue to digital' – are at least as relevant to social care reform, if not more so. Through our research and advocacy, CCN will promote the essential role of our member councils and support them to engage closely with their health counterparts during a period when key reform opportunities.

More widely, there are a number of reform agendas with important implications for both adult social care and public health. As part of our extensive engagement on the Fair Funding Review, CCN will make the strongest possible evidence-based arguments for the government to implement new funding formulas. CCN will also work with affected member councils on the impact of local government reorganisation on adult social care services, supporting areas to understand the costs and risks associated with the disaggregation of services, alongside the opportunities of reform.



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION INTO ADULT SOCIAL CARE

CCN will engage fully with the Independent Commission into Adult Social Care from its inception, bringing our member authorities' depth of experience and our extensive bank of evidence-based research to the forefront of the Commission's thinking around reform.



SUSTAINABLE AND FAIR FUNDING

In the lead up to the Spending Review, and ahead of the start of the Commission's review, CCN will continue to make the case for dedicated additional funding for adult social care, including strong advocacy for the introduction of a new needs-based funding formula for adult social care as part of the Fair Funding Review.



WORKING AGE ADULTS

CCN will partner with Newton to complete the second phase of the project looking at social care reform for Working Age Adults. Building on the top line issues highlighted in the first report, this second volume will look more closely at gathering practical solutions and innovations from across member councils that can shape the direction of reform.



HOUSING & CARE

Given the critical importance of appropriate housing to successful social care, CCN will look to develop its evidence base exploring how these two services can be better aligned, publishing a dedicated report later this year.



SOCIAL CARE AND HEALTH INTEGRATION

CCN will continue to support the strategic development of Integrated Care Systems (ICS) as the primary vehicle for creating equal partnerships locally between health and social care. In particular CCN will engage directly with the relevant aspects outlined in the forthcoming NHS Ten Year Plan, including resuming its role feeding in to the new Strategic Commissioning Framework when it is identified where this work will continue in the wake of NHS England's abolition.



WORKFORCE

CCN will monitor and engage with the Government's initiatives to grow and enhance the adult social care workforce, considering carefully the likely impact on councils and providers alike to ensure that services are adequately resourced and able to maintain a high quality.



PUBLIC HEALTH

CCN will advocate for a central role for council-run public health services within Integrated Care Systems and wider NHS reform, as well as ensure the government improves the funding in this vital area through the introduction of a new public health formula as part of the Fair Funding Review.



DEVOLUTION & REFORM

CCN will place the sustainable delivery of adult social care services at the centre of its advocacy and support for councils in developing reorganisation and devolution proposals. Through forthcoming research with Newton, we will demonstrate the scale required to safeguard services through sustainable unitary proposals, while ensuring the challenges around disaggregation and the impact on people-based services are at the centre of ensuring evidence-based decisions.

CHILDREN'S

SERVICES &

EDUCATION



WORKSTREAM 1

Children's services



WORKSTREAM 2

Special educational needs & disabilities



WORKSTREAM 3

Education & home to school transport

OUR APPROACH

The coming year promises to be the most active in children's policy for at least a decade. There are a host of important reform agendas already underway in children's services, while the Government has stated its intention to set out plans for reforming the SEND system.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill currently passing through parliament contains a range of reforms to children's social care including addressing dysfunction in the care placement market; strengthening multi-agency safeguarding arrangements; and improving the offer for care leavers. The expectation is for further social care reforms to be set out this year with an emphasis on rebalancing the present system towards early intervention.

Over the coming period, CCN will work closely with Department of Education (DfE) and member councils as the reforms in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill begin to be implemented. Alongside this, CCN will seek to update and refresh previous research on funding, expenditure and outcomes in preventative and early intervention services to help shape forthcoming proposals by government.

On SEND reform, CCN continues to be at the heart of this public policy debate. It is anticipated that many of the reforms contained in our joint report with the LGA and Isos Partnership will feature prominently in forthcoming proposals, and CCN must continue to work intensively on this agenda.

CCN will work with partners across the sector to advocate for a solution which addresses the long-term underlying challenges within the system, including the necessity for legislative changes. Alongside this, CCN will continue to work DfE on systematic reforms to home to school transport.

Wider education reform is already a major priority for this government, and this will have implications for local authorities which CCN must continue to influence. CCN will work with the LGA to develop a scope of work and commission new research on the role of local authorities in the education system. This will particularly focus on the creation of a compulsory register of children not in school and other measures in the Bill such as a strengthened duty for local authorities and schools to co-operate over admissions and place-planning. This will seek to ensure that a new role for local authorities is supported by the necessary levers to help them ensure children are not missing out on their education.

There are also a number of reform agendas with important implications for children's services. As part of our engagement on the Fair Funding Review, CCN will make the strongest possible evidence-based arguments for the government to implement new funding formulas in children's services and home to school transport. CCN will also work with affected member councils on the impact of local government reorganisation on children's services and SEND, supporting areas to understand the costs and risks associated with the disaggregation of services, alongside the opportunities of reform.



CHILDREN'S SERVICES REFORM

CCN will support member councils in shaping children's services reform as the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill becomes law and implementation of its measures begins.



SUSTAINABLE & FAIR FUNDING

In the lead up to the Spending Review, CCN will continue to make the case for dedicated additional funding for children's social care - akin to the £2.6bn suggested by Josh McAlister's Independent Review of Social Care - including strong advocacy for the introduction of a new needs-based funding formula for children's services as part of the Fair Funding Review.



CARE PLACEMENTS AND REGULATION

Through our research, analysis and advocacy, CCN will continue to outline the severe challenges in relation placement costs and regulation. CCN closely monitor the impact of the new reforms, including the potential for a price cap on the children's placement market, as well as the ongoing development of the new Regional Care Co-operatives presently being piloted.



PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Through a dedicated research to be published later this year, CCN will seek to update and refresh previous analysis on funding, expenditure and outcomes in preventative and early intervention services in children's services to help shape forthcoming proposals by government.



SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

The network will continue to be leading advocate for SEND reform, working with government to shape their anticipated reforms and adopt the recommendations contained in our report with Isos Partnership. Once published, CCN will coordinate its members' response to the government's proposals, as well as continuing to build a consensus with other key partners including schools, health authorities, and parents.



HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Through our research, analysis and advocacy, CCN will continue to outline the severe financial pressures in the provision of home to school transport services. Alongside wider SEND reform, CCN will make the case for legislative reform in both mainstream and SEND provisions, alongside alongside the introduction of service specific, needs-based formula to introduced as part of the Fair Funding Review.



EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS

CCN will work with the LGA to develop a scope of work and commission new research on the role of local authorities in the education system. A particular focus on this research will be the increasing number of children missing from education, with a key focus on helping member councils with the implementation of their new duties around keeping a register of children being home schooled.



DEVOLUTION & LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

CCN will place the sustainable delivery of children's services at the centre of its advocacy and support for councils in developing reorganisation and devolution proposals. Through forthcoming research with Newton, we will demonstrate the scale required to safeguard services through sustainable unitary proposals. CCN will also undertake dedicated analysis of the various 'alternative delivery models' that could be proposed, including Children's Trusts, to ensure within any new unitary structures, local government remains at the heart of delivering these services in counties

DEVOLUTION

& LOCAL

GROWTH



WORKSTREAM 1

Devolution



WORKSTREAM 2

Local government reorganisation



WORKSTREAM 3

Local growth & investment

OUR APPROACH

Over the coming year, a primary focus of the government will be to deliver its ambitious programme of devolution and local growth, as outlined in the English Devolution White Paper. The network must continue to influence this critical agenda, ensuring the economic potential of county and rural economies is fully recognised and supported through new governance structures at scale.

The much-anticipated English Devolution Bill will be introduced at some point this parliamentary session. This will be a key focus for CCN over the coming year, ensuring that the Bill's provisions support the ability of our members to deliver for their businesses and residents through new Strategic Authorities. CCN will seek to commission new analysis to support the development of new Strategic Authorities in a county and rural context, ensuring a clear delineation between the role of constituent councils and mayors.

CCN will finalise and publish a report by Grant Thornton on the options for fiscal devolution. This report will explore potential fiscal levers that could be devolved and the impact these would have on incentivising devolution, driving growth and incentivising place-based change at the local level.

On wider economic growth, CCN will support councils as they develop locally-led strategic growth plans. As part of this, CCN will prioritise the commissioning of new research that demonstrates the vital contribution of rural and polycentric economies to the government economic missions.

The network will monitor and seek to influence relevant legislation and associated proposals on economic policy, as well as ensure that the views of our members are reflected in the establishment of the new Skills England arms-length body, ensuring it complements the devolution of employment and skills budgets to a local level.

As with previous rounds of local government reorganisation, CCN has a critical role in supporting our members as they develop proposals, while ensuring government decisions remain evidence-based and in line with the statutory criteria issued to locally areas.

Our focus has – and remains – to provide direct support to all member councils that enables the assessment of LGR options with robust evidence. Our aim will be to reduce external consultancy spend by councils through collaborative research, share knowledge and information between councils, and provide peer-to-peer learning and support on the LGR process.

Building on recent work with PwC, Newton and Pixel Financial Management, CCN will consider further research where required to support the development LGR proposals by CCN member councils.

CCN has also established fortnightly Leaders and Chief Executives meetings, alongside Senior Officer Working Groups to support all member councils covering both LGR and devolution. This is alongside our existing Place Directors Group will continue to meet quarterly to focus primarily on local economic growth policy.



ENGLISH DEVOLUTION BILL

CCN will engage extensively with the forthcoming English Devolution Bill. Through our detailed analysis of the Bill, support for member councils, and advocacy with parliamentarians, we will ensure that the provisions support the ambitions of our member authorities, be that in relation to devolution or economic growth.



STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

Building on the experience of our member councils already in combined authorities and those progressing at the fastest pace through the Devolution Priority Programme, CCN will seek to commission new analysis to support the development of new Strategic Authorities in a county and rural context, enabling shared learning and ensuring a clear delineation between the role of constituent councils and mayors.



COUNTY ECONOMIES

CCN will prioritise the commissioning of new research that demonstrates the vital contribution of rural and polycentric economies to the government economic missions, ensuring the economic potential of county economies is fully recognised and supported through new governance structures at scale.



STRATEGIC GROWTH PLANS

CCN will support councils as they develop locally-led strategic growth plans. This includes support through our place-directors group, building on the work undertaken on LEP transition. The network will monitor and seek to influence relevant legislation and associated proposals on economic policy.



SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT

Ensure that the new Skills England body is fully aware of our members views and needs in relation to skills development, as well as feeding into the emerging Industrial Strategy. Through research, analysis and support to councils, CCN will help form a coherent national picture of where skills gaps exist in county areas and how they can be addressed through the devolution of employment support and skills budgets.



POWERS AND FUNDING

Building on forthcoming research on the impact of fiscal devolution in counties, continue to make the case for the government to expand the scope of devolved economic powers, fiscal freedoms and levers to enable member councils to drive local growth and support the sustainable funding of local services.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Provide a programme of support and advocacy for member councils affected by local government reorganisation, from proposal development to preparation for implementation. This includes supporting members and their local partners to develop proposals based on robust evidence and supporting areas through the statutory steps set out by government. Alongside this, CCN will provide consistent national advocacy and engagement with ministers and officials to support member councils proposals.



MEMBER SUPPORT

Maintain and enhance a comprehensive set of weekly and fortnightly meetings and working groups at political and senior officer level to support member councils navigate developments on devolution and local government reorganisation. These groups will directly influence the policy development of CCN and provide key forums to aid councils develop and implement proposals over the coming twelve months.

HOUSING

INFRASTRUCTURE

& TRANSPORT



THEME 1

Housing



THEME 2

Planning & Infrastructure



THEME 3

Transport

OUR APPROACH

Over the next 12 months, CCN will continue to advocate for national policy to help create sustainable and thriving communities. This will recognise the direction of travel that has been set out through the revised National Planning Policy Framework and Planning & Infrastructure Bill, assisting members to navigate new policy and legislation through the lens of devolution and potential local government reorganisation.

While the network do not agree with all the changes that have been brought forward since the General Election, the government are committed to a plan-led system which is welcome. Further research and advocacy on all aspects of the proposals will be undertaken, including on housing targets and the five-year land supply policy, working with members to give live examples of how this policy is impacting local plans and decision-making.

The reintroduction of mandatory strategic plans will play an important role in providing stability and helping marry up housing delivery with infrastructure. Many CCN member councils, or groups of them, will be some of the first to deliver these new style plans, and they will need to be adequately resourced if they are to be delivered. A dedicated programme of support will be put in place, with the commissioning of external expertise to support councils as they start to prepare strategic plans, including sharing best practice and working to make the process as efficient as possible by exploring areas such as shared evidence bases.

Whilst increased housing delivery is vital to overcome the housing crisis, this will do little to address the immediate pressures in housing and homelessness services. The network will continue to advocate for a fair share of funding to support homeless prevention and support, whilst also lobbying for increased delivery of genuinely affordable housing. The Government has made its first steps in reforming the Right to Buy, and CCN is supportive of this, but we believe the government must go further and either abolish it all together, or allow areas to determine the eligibility and discounts for the scheme.

Social and physical infrastructure delivery, including transport, will remain a critical issue over the next year too. The Bus Services Bill will provide more freedoms for councils, but we remain concerned that proposals remain too urban focused. Moreover, while new strategic plans will encourage much more joined up thinking across housing and infrastructure, it will do little to bring in additional funding to deliver it. CCN will be engaging in detailed proposals for buses reform and continuing to advocate for reform to developer contributions.

The Government has also set out an ambitious programme to deliver clean energy projects, including to fast-track them through the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects route. CCN will ensure that local government has a voice in this process, working with members to address concerns and deliver schemes in partnership. Alongside this, CCN will advocate for capital funding and reforms to deliver and improve ageing infrastructure, alongside investing in local roads and stepping up the delivery of charging infrastructure to support electric vehicles.



PLANNING REFORM

CCN will continue to support member councils to assess the impact of the government's planning reforms and undertake extensive engagement on the Planning & Infrastructure Bill as it progresses through Parliament. Further research on the local impact of reforms will be undertaken through a dedicated publication later this year.

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STRATEGIC PLANNING

Provide a programme of support as the first round of Spatial Development Strategies are prepared. CCN will work with member councils to ensure learning and best practice is captured and shared, including the commissioning of additional external expertise to support member councils.

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HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Expand our advocacy and support to member councils in relation to housing services and homelessness. This will include a dedicated publication in late spring exploring the pressures facing member councils and showcasing how our councils are innovating to meet local pressures and support the most vulnerable, alongside concerted advocacy on funding and policy changes our members need to deliver more affordable homes.

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INFRASTRUCTURE FINANCING

As part of wider advocacy on the Planning & Infrastructure Bill, CCN will continue to make an evidence-based case for the government to deliver reform to the system of developer contributions as well as working with member councils to utilise new governance structures to make better use of funding for strategic infrastructure.

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TRANSPORT

CCN will continue to engage with the progression and implementation of the Bus Services Bill, working with the Department for Transport to understand the implications and applicability of new franchising powers, building on the findings of previous research and making the case for a fair distribution of any government funding.

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HIGHWAYS MAINTENANCE

CCN will undertake new research and advocacy on the funding and delivery challenges facing member councils in relation to highways maintenance, pot holes and ageing infrastructure. Alongside this, as part of CCN's Fair Funding Review advocacy, the network will make an evidence-based case for a new formula for highways maintenance that recognises the unique challenges facing county and rural areas.

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WASTE REFORM

Continue to work collaboratively with sector partners, including the LGA, on the implementation of waste reforms, including the implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility, the Emissions Trading Scheme, the Deposit Return Scheme and Simpler Recycling.

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NET-ZERO AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Building on the publication of our forthcoming report with EY *Rural resilience: paving the path to net zero*, undertake a range of activity, support and advocacy on positioning local government and CCN member councils as the strategic bodies for tackling climate change and delivering their net-zero ambitions. This includes the regular analysis of data and insights, alongside the sharing of best practice.

CCN Partners & Sponsorship

CCN's Partnership Programme is of great importance to the network, providing value and insight for members through quality research and helping ensure that our annual programme of events continue to be some of the most high-profile in the local government sector. Partners can be confident that they are engaging not only with the largest part local government, but with a network interested in pursuing evidence-based solutions to the challenges faced by the sector.

Over the coming year we will work to maintain our existing partners, whilst looking at opportunities to expand our reach and access to wider expertise by bringing on new partners. Our model to support this is split into three:

1

Strategic Partners are organisations that CCN work with throughout the year or on multi year partnerships. This allows CCN to work with organisations on research relevant members and CCN's priorities for the year. For example over the past year we have worked over the course of the past year with them on research on social care support for working age adults and the children's social care market, held workshops at our conference on sustainability and devolution.

Strategic partners also attend Conference, other CCN events, and meet with the team monthly to share intelligence about key developments affecting the sector.

Our current Strategic Partners are: **Capita, CCLA, Grant Thornton, IMPOWER, Newton** and **PwC**. We are delighted to be welcoming **Local Partnerships** as a new Strategic Partner from April 2025.

2

Partners are organisations who wish to work with CCN on individual projects, for example a Dialogues Report alongside a launch webinar. As part of this programme we are currently finalising work with PeopleToo regarding Strategic Commissioning.

3

Conference Partners are those who attend our annual Conference, either as an exhibitor or as a host of a roundtable or workshop. In 2024 we welcomed seven new Conference Partners, four hosted stands in our exhibition and CCN worked with three of them on sessions focussed on securing local economic investment, cyber security and financial security.

CCN

COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK

CCN is the voice of England's counties. Representing the local authorities in county areas, the network is a cross-party organisation which develops policy, commissions research, and presents evidence-based solutions to issues on behalf of the largest grouping of councils in England.

In total, the 20 county councils and 17 unitary councils that make up the CCN represent 26 million residents, account for 39% of England's GVA, and deliver high-quality services that matter the most to local communities.

To discuss this document or CCN in more detail, please contact:

Simon Edwards

Chief Executive

simon.edwards@local.gov.uk

James Maker

Director of Policy and Communications

james-maker2@local.gov.uk



@CCNOffice



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