

## **What district councils need from the next Government**

As Chair of the District Councils' Network, I am writing to set out the hopes and expectations of our members for the next Government. This letter sets out the key areas on which we are seeking bold commitments from potential General Election manifestos.

District councils deliver 86 essential services to over 22 million people across 68 per cent of the country – building better lives and stronger economies. District councils are the housing and planning authorities, we tackle homelessness, collect waste, drive growth and renew high streets, we prevent ill health, we deliver cultural and community services, shape the environment and green spaces, and we do all this – and more – in the face of real financial challenges.

To assist the next Government, we have set out three central offers - on housing, prevention and health, and the environment - and the tools we need to deliver them:

### **1 – Housing: Districts will guarantee everyone has somewhere they're proud to call home, to do this we need:**

- Powers to 'step in' to ensure homes with planning permission are built, rebalancing the power between councils and developers once permission is granted.
- The capacity to speed up the Local Plan process, enable land value capture to invest in infrastructure, and less national directions over local planning, especially permitted development rights.
- The removal of New Homes Bonus 0.4 per cent baseline and increased future investment into district services that incentivise communities to back new homes.
- Devolution of the range of disparate funding to districts, such as Housing Infrastructure Fund, so that we can join up strategic investments in growth.
- Flexibility for councils with Housing Revenue Accounts to set Right to Buy discounts and retain 100 per cent of sales receipts in order to build more social housing.
- Powers for districts to direct the use of local housing association housing for the most vulnerable.

### **2 – Health and wellbeing: Districts will help people stay healthy and independent and out of expensive health, care and homelessness systems, to do this we need:**

- Significantly scaled up Disabled Facilities Grant with new freedoms for how it is used to help older and vulnerable people stay at home longer.
- To be given a leading role in implementing social prescribing by becoming mandatory partners on Health and Wellbeing Boards and in Primary Care Networks.
- Powers to raise a 3 per cent prevention precept to ensure communities in shire county areas benefit from additional investment in services supporting good health
- The lifting of the freeze on the Local Housing Allowance and reconnecting it to rents, to reduce the risks of homelessness by ensuring welfare covers the cost of housing
- Devolution of the complex range of national homelessness funds to districts, with the freedoms to address local need to focus on preventing homelessness
- A duty on a range of public services – including health, justice, employment – to cooperate with districts in the prevention of homelessness.

**3 – Environment: Districts will create and protect a better, more sustainable environment for future generations, to do this we need:**

- Total freedom to adapt local waste collection policies that best enable the reduction, re-use and recycling in local circumstances
- Powers through the planning system to ensure new developments meet zero carbon standards, and to create places enabling sustainable homes, business and transport
- Support in leading the adaptation and sustainable development of existing public realm, and the retrofitting of existing homes.

**Finally, to deliver our ambitions for communities, our services must be underpinned by long-term financial certainty and genuine devolution. This means:**

- Reversing the decline in spending power for districts with an overall uplift in each year of the spending review between 2021 and 2024
- Setting districts free to attract and use income in ways that are locally responsive and accountable, including allowing them to set council tax increases, to set the poundage for business rates, to raise other levies such as a levy on tourists, to set local planning fees, and to determine all exemptions and discounts.
- Replacing the complexity of different national programmes with simpler allocations to councils, with long-term certainty and freedom for them locally to best meet needs.

Our future national and local wellbeing will rely on having the right housing, good jobs and growth, positive health and environment, and strong family and social connections.

District councils deliver the vital local services that enable all of this, and we hope to see the policies set out above reflected in your party's next General Election manifesto.

All recommendations in this short letter are supported by a body of evidence. We would be delighted to offer more information or to discuss these proposals in detail. For further information please contact [dcn@local.gov.uk](mailto:dcn@local.gov.uk).

Yours Sincerely,



Cllr John Fuller OBE, Chairman of the District Councils Network