

31 March 2021

Dear Member,

District Councils' Network: Annual Update to the Membership

Last March I wrote to you having sat around the Cabinet table in Number 10 with the Prime Minister, and the Health and Local Government Secretaries, to ensure that the essential role of District Councils in addressing the emerging Covid challenges was recognised at the highest levels of Government.

And as the crisis emerged, District Councils came together and collectively rose to the challenge; ensuring that every fridge was filled, and every bin collected. As our members redefined and recalibrated what it was possible to do for residents and business, the importance of the final mile delivery has never been more important.

We have coordinated the local pandemic response at street level, customised to local circumstances, which has ensured that residents have been looked after and businesses sustained to the point at which the economy can emerge into the bright spring sunshine.

And when national initiatives sometimes stumbled, local approaches to shielding, test and trace and business support were made effective. As housing authorities, we moved rough sleepers from the streets and placed roofs over the heads of the hidden homeless, helping them straighten out their lives. Even today, the most recent analysis of business support demonstrates that businesses in district council areas have had the greatest proportion of help delivered with the minimum delay of any tier of Government.

I am proud at the way in which the DCN has adapted to engage you, to represent you, and to help support you. We represent coastal, cathedral, rural and urban communities amongst our 187-district strong membership. This has given us a powerful voice to Government in helping lobby, influence, and shape some of the key support linked to covid response and recovery, and much more.

That influence has been reflected in the levels of financial support from the Government. There has been recognition of the particular vulnerability of districts on fees and charges, cashflow support from business rates receipts and a new local services formula introduced for our settlement for the first time. We were relieved that the powerful incentives to build the national economy, one local economy were retained for 2021-22, providing some short-term stability, alongside direct and generous support from Town Funds and other housing grants.

Our efforts as 187 districts working together have helped to secure wide ranging financial support for both 2020-21 and 2021-22. Each District will benefit in line with their own circumstances and spending need, but on average it easily equates to almost £7m per district.

Of course, not all pressures have been met. Our All-Party Parliamentary Group and our links to the Institute for Fiscal Studies have demonstrated that districts have been the hardest hit financially as a proportion of our budgets. There is uncertainty over the future of the New Homes Bonus and

Business Rates. Business Rates Pools are less certain. CIL is under review. And members with outsourced leisure services are right to feel hard done by, and we continue to prioritise lobbying efforts here.

As we consider 'fair funding', we will need to ensure that authorities who shout the loudest on the genuine pressures on adults and children's social care services, do not drown out the district role in driving a healthy recovery through place making, leisure & sport, or undermine the need for powerful incentives to support business, jobs & livelihoods.

And we have we engaged forcefully with government on plans for local government reorganisation. We have generated rigorous evidence that equips us to continue rejecting the arguments for having county unitary councils everywhere and retaining 'local' government, and are supporting our colleagues in those areas now going through the process.

We know that 2021/22 will continue to demonstrate districts' strengths as we play our full role in driving our nation's economic and health recovery one local economy at a time. The DCN will be with you all the way, pushing your voice into the corridors (or zoom calls) of power to best help you best serve your communities making the case throughout Government of the essential importance of the 'final mile' for the statutory services that districts are responsible for.

I have noticed in recent weeks that there have been several announcements where the funding and responsibility have been separated and this tendency must be challenged. But in the meantime, please take comfort that our efforts have generated significantly more financial support to members than the typical £1,700 DCN membership fee. As you would expect, I'm focused on providing value for money!

There is so much we can be proud of over the last 12 months – I would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow Board Members, our lead Chief Executives and the DCN officer team, for all their contributions over the past year, and to wish our colleagues from Corby, Daventry, East Northamptonshire, Northampton, South Northamptonshire and Wellingborough all the best as they embark on a new journey from 1 April as district unitaries.

I have asked the DCN team to set out below a summary of some of our achievements and plans for the next 12 months including a return to our in-person conference and AGM on 21 and 22 October – more details coming soon.

Let me know if you have any suggestions by emailing DCN@local.gov.uk or by calling 0207 664 3048.

Kind regards,



Cllr John Fuller OBE
Chairman, District Councils' Network

DCN Annual Report: Achievements during 2020-21 and plans for 2021-22.

Below we summarise our work on:

1. Lobbying and publications
2. Events - bringing districts together
3. Growing the district voice and communications
4. Membership Fees for 2021-22

1. Lobbying and publications

We've highlighted a selection of our work below:

- Leading the call for retaining local government, pushing a range of evidenced arguments to Government, to Parliamentarians directly and through our APPG, the press and our partners. For instance [Power in Place](#) set out the need for devolution to empower districts to deliver the recovery, [Bigger is not Better](#) challenged poor arguments for reform into county unitary councils, [Size Doesn't Matter](#) – jointly supported with our Unitary Council Network colleagues – provided a pragmatic route forward for devolution, and [Transformation in Localities](#) looked at how to build on districts strengths. With the Devolution White Paper rumoured for later in 2021, we will continue to champion district voice in this debate.
- We've led the charge to have government recognise the serious financial challenges facing districts, working to ensure [our position and recommendations](#) are recognised by Ministers and officials. We've given written and oral evidence to the HCLG inquiries, engaged Parliamentarians, commissioned research, and pushed warnings through the press, for instance on [BBC](#) and [BBC online](#).
- Our efforts have helped to secure wide ranging financial support over 2020-21 and 2021-22 - including a fresh round of New homes Bonus reward, a decision not to reset business rates for 2021/22, £318m in covid grant funding, a new Lower Tier Services Grant, and schemes to compensate for loss of income from sales, fees and charges. Each District will benefit in line with their own circumstances and spending need, but if this was split evenly over the 187 District Councils, it could equate to circa £6.7m.
- Government has also committed to a scheme to compensate 75% of irrecoverable business rate and council tax losses for 2020-21, worth an estimated £800 million for the sector as a whole. And this month we raised the impact on district finances should appeals for rate reductions, due material change of circumstances amid the pandemic, be successful. We're pleased to Government has acted quickly and [stepped in with support](#) to help protect districts.
- We have been championing the role of districts at the heart of local economies at the centre of Government, helping BEIS Ministers and officials towards shaping workable business grant schemes, putting districts at the centre of efforts to re-open high streets and businesses safely, and running a campaign pushing [our position](#) on controversial proposals for planning reform. Our positions have been covered for instance in the [Evening Standard](#), [Independent](#) and [Mirror](#). Looking ahead to 2021 we will continue to engage with the wider proposals within the Planning White Paper to help empower a well-resourced locally led planning system. We will continue to work to ensure districts can play a lead role

in the future of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Levelling up fund, housing infrastructure funding, high street funding and more.

- We quickly raised the critical plight of our leisure centres with Ministers and officials, working with you to develop the first financial evidence base calling for additional funding to the sector, raising public attention to the issue through the coverage in [PoliticsHome](#) and the [Telegraph](#). Throughout our engagement with Government on the development of the £100 million scheme we have emphasised that it is not sufficient, and that it should be distributed as simply and quickly as possible. We will continue to make this case into 2021, as part of wider case for enabling the role of district services in leading good health.
- Districts provide the local safety net for so many families in hardship. We have continued to push for districts to have the tools to help those most vulnerable, ‘everyone-in’ has proven what is possible and we were the first to warn of increases in homeless acceptances, our campaign was widely covered by [BBC](#), [BBC online](#) and the [Observer](#), successfully campaigning for extensions to the eviction ban. And more recently our report on increased food bank use was prominently featured by the [Observer](#).
- We have pushed for help for people on low incomes to self-isolate, with our campaign widely covered in the [Sun](#) and the [Times](#). Meanwhile we have ensured district officers are working with Government on designing the T&T self-isolating support payment scheme so that it is workable. We continue to press for a lead role for districts schemes supporting people in hardship, including in those cases where funding allocations have gone to county councils. Looking ahead into 2021, we will look to focus on how to prevent homelessness. Including looking at the welfare, employment and skills policy and funding, and how districts can shape public services locally to support families through a difficult economic period.
- We have been proactive in working closely with the Cabinet Office to address the challenges posed by the May elections – forming a working group of Chief Executives to work through the practical challenges.
- You can read all our consultation responses on our website, just visit www.dcn@local.gov.uk

2. Events - Bringing districts together

- *Save the date:* While we approach Spring with more optimism, the Prime Minister’s roadmap means it will not be possible to hold an in-person conference on 17 and 18 June as hoped – instead, we are working on bringing you our in-person conference on 21-22 October and will share booking details with you in the very near future.
- Since the start of the pandemic, DCN have increased our engagement with you - moving to regular online calls, with over 23 sessions bringing notable speakers into your offices (or living rooms!); deepening our relationship with Ministers and officials to offer them advice at pace; and making sure the district voice is heard in the right zoom-rooms at the right time. We regularly average between 250-300 leaders and chief executives on these calls, and your feedback on them is always gratefully received so we can make them as relevant and informative for you as possible.
- We’ve continued to build our parliamentary profile – holding four APPG meetings since last April, attended by 377 parliamentarians, officials and councillors. We’ve also held a virtual briefing for parliamentarians only and were joined by 48 parliamentary attendees. High profile attendees include Clive Betts MP, Chair of the HCLG Committee, Daisy Cooper MP,

Liberal Democrats Deputy Leader, Lord Tebbit, Conservative Peer and former Cabinet Minister, and officials from the offices of Matt Hancock MP, Anneliese Dodds MP and Kemi Badenoch MP. We've followed up on our parliamentary activity with 9 briefing documents, two letters from APPG chair Mark Pawsey MP, and had 10 written questions tabled and answered.

- As well as our all-member calls, we have worked in collaboration with the LGA and CCN to host two workshops on the government's planning reforms, and collaborated with the Society of District Council Treasurers to host a workshop for Finance and Economic Development officers as they navigated the development of policies to govern the discretionary business grants.
- Throughout it all, our Executive has met fortnightly, and Chief Executive Group weekly, pushing our engagement with senior officials at MHCLG and BEIS, seeking to highlight the issues of concern to districts, and influence government thinking.
- While the pandemic sadly forced us to postpone the year's Staff Development Programme, we were pleased to host a virtual closing event for this year's cohort, and look forward to starting to plan for the next cohort as the public health situation allows.

3. Growing our district voice - communications and media

- We continue to build the profile of district councils in the national media, with coverage now secured on a regular basis averaging 2-3 per month, in national titles such as the Telegraph, Guardian, Times, Mirror and Express and on television and radio including ITV and BBC. Please do add us to your press release distribution list – we often get enquiries from journalists looking for local examples.
- We have nearly doubled our twitter engagement on last year, with 390,000 impressions across the year, including the #districtsdo trend. Over the past year we have gained over 400 new followers; increasing our follower count to 3,150, and count MHCLG Secretary of State Robert Jenrick MP, and Minister for local government Luke Hall MP among our followers.

4. District Councils' Network Membership Fees for 2021-22

The DCN has now completed the transition towards the target fee in 2021/22 following the introduction of the new fee structure in 2019/20. The fee structure is based on the ONS population data and has been updated with the mid-2019 figures. In 2021/22 the member fees will range from £768 to a maximum of £3,750+VAT.

The member fee model is based on a district council population model. The 'target fee' figure for each district equals the total population of each individual district council x £0.015p from 2021/22.

For 2021-22, the fee structure is as follows:

	2021/22 Fees (Full target figure)
District Council	Estimated Population mid-2019 (ONS)* x 0.015

*To ensure the most up to date population figures we will use the latest population estimates from the ONS which are updated every June.

We are looking forward to working with you in 2021/22!