

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Department, HC 302

Monday 27 April 2020

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Ben Everitt; Paul Holmes; Rachel Hopkins; Daniel Kawczynski; Abena Opong-Asare; Mary Robinson; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 1-69

Witnesses

I: Councillor James Jamieson, Chairman, Local Government Association, and Mark Lloyd, Chief Executive, LGA.

II: Rob Whiteman, Chief Executive, Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, Julie Ogley, President, Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, and Jim McManus, Vice-President, Association of Directors of Public Health.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor James Jamieson and Mark Lloyd.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this session of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. This morning we will be looking at how local government is responding to the covid-19 crisis, and the challenges in doing so.

Before we begin with our witnesses, members of the Committee have made declarations of interest in the register. Also, some of us are vice-presidents of the Local Government Association, some are local councillors and some employ local councillors—I need to put that on the record formally.

On behalf of the whole Committee, I want to thank everyone in local government: officers, councillors and, in particular, those frontline workers in social care and helping with the volunteers, the environmental and public health officials, people doing our refuse collection on a daily basis, and those doing all the other important jobs that local councils do. We put on the record our thanks to them, for the way in which they have carried on delivering services in this very difficult time.

Our first two witnesses are Councillor Jamie Jamieson, chairman of the



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Local Government Association, and Mark Lloyd, chief executive of the Local Government Association, which is the organisation that represents all councils throughout England. You are welcome in joining us this morning.

I will begin by asking you both about finance. Obviously, money is important, and a lot of it is being spent at present to deliver on these new and important challenges faced by councils. The Government began by saying that the NHS would get all the money it needed, and that local government would as well, but a couple of weeks ago the Secretary of State said that, actually, it wasn't quite like that and that the burden had to be shared between councils and central Government. Do you have any thoughts on that, how you responded and whether exactly what the situation is has now been clarified?

Cllr Jamieson: First, thank you, Chair, for your introductory remarks, which I am sure all those in local government will appreciate. As chairman of the LGA, I am astounded by the effort put in by, and the agility of, local government and our contractors on behalf of the public.

In answer to your question on finance, clearly local government has stepped up. This has cost us a lot of money in additional costs, but there has also been a very significant impact on our income, which a number of councils are very worried about. As you say, the Government have said that they will provide the resources to ensure that we can deliver our services, and the additional £1.6 billion, on top of the previous £1.6 billion, is a very welcome move. Also, the some £4 billion cash-flow funding—early grants and so forth—has been very helpful.

That has given us breathing space, but there will definitely be a need for additional funding. The estimates that we have, based on the initial forms that councils have been feeding through to MHCLG, indicate that the quantum could very well be three or even four times that amount.

Mark Lloyd: Thank you for your praise for the local government response to the public health crisis, which has been amazing. As Councillor Jamieson has said, the Government has provided some helpful injections of money into local government—£3.2 billion in total so far—and the cash-flow measures are incredibly helpful.

However, as Councillor Jamieson has made clear, not only do councillors have rising cost pressures, but the normal income streams are dropping off, as people consider whether to pay their council tax or their business rates. Other forms of income, for example from car parking and so forth, have dried up, so councils are facing a very significant hole in their finances this year.

Although the initial money is very welcome, the Government have said that they will stand shoulder to shoulder with local councils as they lead the response to this public health crisis. The key thing that we will need to do is make sure that promise is honoured in the months ahead in this financial year. As you all know, councils cannot run a deficit budget; they have to balance their budget each and every year. For 2020-21, we need



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to give councils the resources that are essential to making sure we can maintain that position.

- Q2 **Chair:** I am not clear whether you think you have the assurances that all the money you are spending on dealing with this crisis is going to be found by central Government. Has the idea of burden sharing now been formally dropped by Government, as far as you are concerned?

Cllr Jamieson: We were very pleased when Robert Jenrick did the briefing—I think it was the previous Saturday—and he gave a number of reassurances that we would get the money. We need a cast-iron guarantee that we will be funded to the amount that we are delivering to our communities and the impact of lost income.

- Q3 **Chair:** Can I pick up a couple of points? Other colleagues want to come in—I know Rachel wants to ask about the income. We have talked about the immediate challenges and the budgets for this year, but you also mentioned the longer-term issues and where that leaves local government. In the midst of this crisis, and given the clear challenges for local government finances this year, do you think it might be sensible to drop the proposed changes to business rates retention and fair funding, and the other major proposals that were actually on the agenda before the virus hit us?

Mark Lloyd: As we went into this year, before councils led their phenomenal response to the crisis, we were forecasting a £6.5 billion shortfall in councils' budgets through to 2025, including a £3.9 billion shortfall in adult social care. That was before we started the response to covid-19. Councils are in a fragile position—that is for sure. They do not have adequate reserves to draw on in order to cover even a part of the gap that they are facing. The financial position is uncertain. The outlook on business rates isn't certain either, particularly with the reliefs that the Government have rightly granted around business rates.

I do think that there is consideration right now under way at ministerial level about a pause, rather than a dropping of issues around business rates retention and the fair funding review. The general view across our membership is that a pause would be appropriate while we deal with this particular crisis, but we will need to come back to ensuring that there is sustainable and fair funding for local government in the medium and long term, which will need some kind of review. But we do need to take a breath after we have dealt with the crisis, before deciding the direction of travel.

- Q4 **Chair:** That is quite a clear response. We can pick that up with the Secretary of State in due course. I have one further point, and then I will pass over to Bob Blackman to follow up on some of those issues. There is a lot of talk now about testing and then contact tracking and tracing. There could be a major cost for local government in terms of environmental health and public health input. Have the Government been talking to you about that? If you are expected to help significantly with that, which I hope you are, will it come out of the money that has been



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allocated to you now, or is there likely to be a central budget that you draw from? Have any clues been given?

Mark Lloyd: I think it is fair to say that the compositions are not yet at a mature point, in terms of local government's input into the contact tracing work. There have been some initial conversations with our colleagues in the Association of Directors of Public Health. Local government has a very wide skillset that could play a key role in contact tracing, to supplement or complement the national effort. But as we sit here this morning, we are not clear about what that role would be, nor whether it would be adequately resourced. It would certainly need to come with appropriate resources.

Chair: Okay. So the reality is that conversations haven't started. Again, I'm sure that we can follow that question up with the Secretary of State. Bob Blackman wants to come in now on a specific point about the finances.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** Welcome, and thank you for your kind remarks about my birthday yesterday, which I have to say was a bit of a strange experience in lockdown, but never mind. We had a virtual party instead of a normal get-together.

Could I just pick up on the issue about cash flow and the impact on services that we may see? I think that there is a report out this morning suggesting that by the end of the year the deficit for local authorities may be £5.2 billion, even after the extra money that the Government have put in. Can you first and foremost put a number on what the prediction is, given that we will see the Secretary of State—virtually—next week, and therefore it would be very helpful to have a number to put to him that we should be asking for, rather than just looking at additional support in a general fashion? Mark, do you want to pick up on that first?

Mark Lloyd: Thank you. Councillor Jamieson touched on this in his earlier answer. To their credit, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have embarked upon surveying councils in detail about the immediate financial impact. I am pleased to say that 97% of councils have responded to that initial survey, which is unprecedented. They have committed to repeat that surveying on a monthly basis, so April's is complete and is being analysed.

We have seen half the responses so far to that survey, and Councillor Jamieson's reference to the £3.6 billion that has been invested so far, and the fact that we think it looks like it needs to be three to four times that number, is based upon the preliminary analysis we have seen of the April survey. By the time the Secretary of State is with you, he should have the full analysis of that April survey and be able to give you a better insight than we can this morning.

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** Right. I understand that, but it is always very helpful, when we are questioning Ministers, to have a cast-iron figure that we can pin our hopes on, if you like, to assist you. If you are able to supply that information to us, it would be very helpful.



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Both Mark and James have said that clearly local authorities have to balance things up, in terms of what they do and what they don't do, but there have been strong rumours that certainly a number of, shall we say, small district councils and the treasurers or finance directors have to consider section 114 notices, in order to stop certain services—I think Rachel will talk later about income and what services may cease. Can you shed any light on what consideration there is at the moment about issuing section 114 notices, which of course would be drastic in the current circumstances?

Mark Lloyd: Councillor Jamieson used the phrase “breathing space” in response to an earlier question, and the allocation of £3.2 billion to councils, plus critically the cash-flow measures—the deferring of the central share of business rates to central Government and the early payment of some of the grants to councils—have been very important in allowing directors of finance to make sure that they can pause and take stock of the long-term finances. They need to look to the end of this year, but critically they have a long-term planning responsibility in councils and need to take stock of the financial outlook in the medium term. Some of them are indeed nervous, but the additional resources that were announced last Saturday have allowed them to ensure that they can look at these issues in the round.

I am not anticipating in the very short term any councils needing to issue a section 114 notice, but it is under active consideration by some finance directors, which is why we need to stay close to MHCLG and our colleagues in Her Majesty's Treasury, to make sure that money is injected into councils at the point it is needed, rather than having a wait-and-see approach to council finances.

Cllr Jamieson: If I may come back on that, many district councils in particular, as the precepting authority, find that they retain only, say, 10% of the council tax or NNDR, and the remainder gets passed back to the Government or upper-tier authorities. Clearly, in that context, the amount of money that they would have to flow out without these cash-flow measures would be alarming for many of them, so that is a big issue.

As Mark was just saying, the fact that these cash-flow measures have come in has helped them, but it is clearly a worry when you have precepting authorities who may raise £100 million-plus in council tax and be expected to pass on 90% of it, yet their net budget may be only £15 million. The assurance that, if there is any shortfall in council tax, it will be covered and they will have to pay on only a pro rata amount or another mechanism is critical for them to give confidence to their section 151 officers that they will not have to issue such notices.

Chair: Thank you. On that issue of income, we will move on to Rachel Hopkins.

Q7 **Rachel Hopkins:** Thank you for your comments so far about income. I want to build on the revenue streams that you have already touched on, which have been primarily fees and charges, council tax and business



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rates. More and more councils, however, are relying on income that they get through their commercial activity, such as trading and other commercial streams. What are your thoughts on the support for councils that, as you said, might need the money injected when it is needed, if their commercial income streams have been affected by the coronavirus crisis?

Mark Lloyd: Thank you for the question, which is important. Councils have been innovative and creative about ways of generating resources to fund key public services. That has been necessary. None of us will forget that in the last decade something like £15 billion of central Government funding has gone out of local government, and councils have responded in all sorts of ways, one of which is driving up other kinds of income sources, as you said.

Councils also play a key role in ensuring that key national assets exist. For example, the councils in Greater Manchester own the airport, and the council in Luton owns its airport. All those enterprises are taking something of a battering during this period. Councils have a wide range of commercial activities that they need to consider. Part of the return to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in April was trying to take stock of loss of income as well as increased service pressures.

Again, that is an issue that the Committee will want to keep an eye on in the coming weeks and months. I do not think it has been entirely resolved yet whether losses of income will feature as centrally in our relationship with the Government. From the Local Government Association's perspective, of course they should, because those commercial activities are about funding core public services.

Q8 **Rachel Hopkins:** With this worry about income streams and setting a balanced budget, are you, through the information you have received, aware of many councillors who are potentially looking at doing emergency budgets over the next few months to basically make sure that they can meet their obligations in a financially balanced budget, with the recognition that that will have a massive impact on the services that they will be able to deliver, given the financial insecurity they are in?

Mark Lloyd: I am certain that all councils will be reviewing their financial position urgently. It is helpful that legislation has been changed so that councils can also take decisions remotely. That is the kind of innovation we should hang on to in the long term, not just the short term, in response to the crisis.

I am aware of a small number of councils that have formally said that they plan to review their budgets in the very near future. I expect that to be a trend that will spread across other councils as an important part of their prudent fiscal management.

Chair: We will move on now. To follow up on those issues, I call Ben Everitt.



Q9 Ben Everitt: It will probably be quite quick, because some of the answer was already there in response to Rachel's question. What are the key lessons that we have learned in the covid crisis that we can feed into the understandably paused fairer funding review? I am thinking specifically about the burden that has been carried by the social care sector and how that affects adult social care and its future funding.

Cllr Jamieson: If I can come back on that and also just return briefly to Rachel's question, clearly adult social care is underfunded to start with. We may come back to that later. That underfunding will only grow with time, so I won't talk too much about that, but just on Rachel's comment I think it is well known that commercial income is important to a number of councils—I think Rachel's own council, Luton, makes around £50 million from the airport per year, which is just under a third of its budget—so it is quite critical. And we just don't know how quickly lockdown is going to open out, and what its impact on the economy will be. So while we are talking about a lot of numbers, we are actually quite uncertain what those numbers are, because it makes a huge difference whether lockdown finishes in two weeks, six weeks or six months. So it is hard to be crystal clear on a number.

Chair: We will come back to social care in due course. Daniel Kawczynski, please. I am sorry, Daniel, we can't hear you at present. Hopefully we can rectify that. We will move on to Paul Holmes.

Q10 Paul Holmes: I just want to examine briefly what Rachel mentioned about some of the commercial activities that local authorities, and particularly smaller local authorities, have in connection with commercial property investment. A number of councils have got quite high debt levels at the moment—Eastleigh in my constituency has £500 million; and Spelthorne has over £1 billion of commercial property investment. With commercial rents and returns reducing, have you had any feedback from either chief executives or leaders of councils to say that they have done any monitoring work to see how this will impact their income with falling returns, and do you think that there is a case now for strengthening regulation from central Government about how and when local authorities can borrow for commercial property investments?

Mark Lloyd: I think it is fair to say that councils during the early weeks of this response have been focused on issues such as shielding vulnerable members of their community, making sure that their adult social care is responsive, and making sure that vulnerable children are safeguarded, and they are now turning their minds to the longer term. The clear instruction from Government, and the clear ambition anyway from local leaders, was to get on with dealing with the crisis. They are now taking stock of the consequences of that and looking at their medium and long-term outlook.

I have not yet had councils come to me saying that they have got significant issues resulting from their commercial investments, but I guess all of us can sit here anticipating that that concern will come. The Government are very quick to say that the reliefs that have been provided around rentals and so on in the commercial sector are not a holiday but a



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delay in payment—it is not a relief; it is a delay in the payment of rent. I think we do need to track the consequences in the commercial sector and income streams that councils are depending on in the weeks and months ahead to understand how big a problem that will present. I am not able to give you a categoric position today.

Chair: Thank you for that. We will now move on to look at help to individuals and businesses. Mary Robinson.

Q11 **Mary Robinson:** Good morning, Chair. I would like to turn specifically to the financial support from the Government to support people's livelihoods. Are local authorities observing any gaps in the financial support that the Government have made available for individuals and for businesses?

Cllr Jamieson: Yes, the Government have done an awful lot to help businesses, and I think we need to recognise that, but, as with any scheme, there are always going to be gaps. Two typical gaps that we have seen already are people who have only recently become self-employed, who obviously have missed out. The other one that we are quite concerned with: a lot of people use things like third-space offices and the business rate is part of their rental stream. Therefore they are not below that business rate in order to get the grants. So you will see plenty of businesses with 20 to an office, and the business rate is paid centrally, so some scheme that allows—people who are small businesses and ought to benefit from the business grants can do so.

Mark Lloyd: I have a quick supplementary question, given that the question is also about support for individuals. Councils were pleased that, in his Budget, the Chancellor announced a £500-million hardship fund for local councils to deploy locally. We anticipated having some discretion about how we could use some elements of that hardship fund, in the light of us not expecting, at that stage, all those people entitled to council tax relief to take up the resources. It now looks like enhanced claimants for council tax relief might use up that money, giving councils little flexibility to target resources in a discretionary way, so we would like to keep that particular sum of money under review with the Treasury.

Chair: That is a helpful point for us.

Q12 **Mary Robinson:** There seem to be some gaps—and some successes—that are going to cause future issues. The British Chambers of Commerce has complained that councils are adopting different approaches in paying out the grants to businesses. This can include an onerous application process that can be slow. How are you helping councils to adopt a straightforward, similar and rapid process for the applications for these moneys?

Mark Lloyd: Leaders of councils and chief executives all share a fundamental concern about the wellbeing of their business community. They are absolutely committed to ensuring that small and medium-sized enterprises survive this lockdown and are able to come back into business afterwards, and are determined to get the resources to them as quickly as



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possible. As we sit here, the figures that were shared last Monday—last Monday—showed that councils had already paid out £6 billion to businesses across the country. I deliberately emphasised last Monday, because updated figures are due out today and I expect to see further progress in the payment of those grants to businesses.

In terms of encouraging and supporting councils, we are in touch with all the councils in the country all the time. We, through Councillor Jamieson and myself, have been shining a light on the importance of fast-tracking these payments out to businesses, and all councils share our concern in that regard. If any are struggling, we are providing them with help to look at their processes and ensure that they can get the money to businesses as quickly as possible.

- Q13 **Mary Robinson:** I wonder whether you can pinpoint or you have an observation on why some councils are struggling and some are not. We are waiting for today's figures, but last week's figures seem to show that about 50% of firms that are within scope to receive the small business grants have now been paid, which says that quite a lot—50%—are still waiting. My local authority, Stockport, has paid out to 71%, but I can talk to a colleague here for whom the figure is just over 30%. What accounts for this discrepancy?

Mark Lloyd: The core issue relates to the nature of the business community in each place. I can think of rural councils on beautiful parts of our coastline that have many thousands of holiday homes that qualify for this relief. Reaching out to those business owners, because they do operate as letting businesses, and encouraging them to be aware of the support that is available and access it is proving to be much more difficult than we anticipated. It does come down to the nature of the business community in a particular place and how easy it is to reach out to them and engage with them on this scheme. That varies very significantly between urban centres and rural locations.

- Q14 **Mary Robinson:** Would that be the key response to any comments that some councils are just being too slow?

Mark Lloyd: No council is being deliberately too slow. All councils share the ambition, as I have stated, to support their businesses. What we are trying to do is to make sure we are reaching out to the wide base of small and medium-sized businesses as quickly as we can.

- Q15 **Ian Byrne:** While we are talking about the slowness of councils' reactions, could I direct this question to James, please? Could that be down to the effects of austerity on certain councils and the level of cuts that some have faced, in terms of being able to assist the Government in administering these schemes to local businesses? Could that be a direct effect of austerity?

Cllr Jamieson: As Mark outlined, there have been differences and, in the majority of cases, these are the factors. We were talking about coastal businesses. I am certainly aware of some authorities that have different software, which they have needed to address. Bear in mind also that it



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tends to be the same team who are dealing with housing benefit and also rebilling for those people who have got an NDR holiday for a year, so there is a huge amount of work going through a fairly small part of an organisation.

I know all councils have redeployed staff. They have been working seven days a week and doing overtime. As Mark also alluded to, where we are aware that councils have not been able to deliver it quite as quickly, we in the LGA have spoken to them and asked them whether they needed help in any way in order to facilitate that. So I don't think this is something one could directly tie down to austerity.

- Q16 **Ian Byrne:** May I follow up on that? On the level of cuts that Liverpool City Council have faced and the number of staff that we have had to let go, this surely impacts on the ability to implement the scheme. I would like a real answer on this. You do not think the cuts to local councils have had an impact on the ability to implement this scheme.

Cllr Jamieson: If I can go back, the austerity has had a huge impact on councils across the board in terms of all the services that they deliver and so forth. If you look at the impact of austerity, it has been in the general services that they deliver. In terms of grant, this is a financial part of the council. It is a fairly small section. I think the real drivers here are more linked to the mix of businesses, the type of software and all other things. Can I say austerity has had no impact? Of course I cannot, but it is a much more complex situation with this particular part of the council. If you were talking about other parts of the council, I would be in agreement with you. There have been cutbacks and they will have impacted the ability of councils in other areas.

- Q6 **Chair:** Okay, I think we can move on. One small additional point from me: Sheffield Council has raised this with me, but I understand the core cities have as well collectively. Since the grant scheme for small businesses came in, the Government have changed the guidance 13 times with little consultation with local authorities. Has that been a problem that has caused delays and difficulties?

Mark Lloyd: Inevitably the delay to the publication of guidance meant we were delayed from getting out of the starting blocks. Once we were out of the blocks, we changed our routes to reflect any tweaks that the guidance has had. While it has not been helpful, it has not stopped councils from trying to get on with what they are trying to do, which is to get the money into local businesses.

Chair: Can we move on? We have important issues to discuss on adult social care, which was mentioned before. Ian Byrne will lead the questions on that.

- Q7 **Ian Byrne:** This question is directed to Mark. How would you assess the performance of local resilience forums in ensuring frontline staff have the PPE and other equipment that they need?



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Mark Lloyd: Gosh, that is an enormous question; I will try to be brief. Local resilience forums are not statutory bodies. Local resilience forums bring together all of the key responders in a local area to lead a response to a particular issue. Around the issue of personal protective equipment, the local resilience forums have been a stopgap arrangement to try and direct PPE to areas of shortage. The fundamental issue has been national supply and distribution. We should have had in place a situation where we had an adequate supply and a distribution system that worked. We had neither. Local resilience forums had to step in to respond to the issue that we had got. They were provided with inadequate levels of supply initially. The fact that they were even involved in solving the issue is thanks in no small part to the LGA's chairman, Councillor Jamieson, who encouraged this as a stopgap response.

The LRFs should not be the long-term answer. The Government needs to make sure that its proposed clipper service gets beyond testing and to implementation to deliver personal protective equipment to all of the care settings across the country. That looks to be three or four weeks away from being operational. LRFs are doing their best to plug the gap in the interim, but my fundamental answer is that they should not need to.

Q8 **Ian Byrne:** That was an excellent answer. Thanks very much for that. Are the social care workforce and other key council staff being offered sufficient testing for covid-19?

Mark Lloyd: I think it is fair to say that testing has built up towards a more successful operation over a period of time. Can I sit here and say to you that social care staff and other frontline staff in councils had the immediate access that they needed in the first place? I think we all know that the answer is no. We had the issue of regional test centres that social care staff could not reach, and we are now at the point—I am pleased about this—where pop-up testing centres are available to go into locations. That is the kind of answer that we needed to get to, but it has taken too long to get here.

Q9 **Ian Byrne:** That was another excellent answer—thank you, Mark. I think we can say that what we have seen has been a categorical failure. A report came out on the BBC yesterday that out of 210 care providers, 159 said that none of their workers had been screened. I think what we see in care homes is going to be quite terrifying. I take my hat off to all the work that you have done in the LGA and the local resilience forums to try to plug the gaps, but I think you are absolutely spot on in what you have said: it is a national Government failure, and it is something that we need to really drill into, certainly from this Committee's perspective on Monday.

Mark Lloyd: Can I add a footnote to that comment? The national tests about whether we change the current approach to staying at home start with "Can the NHS cope?" I would love that to say, "Can the NHS and the care system cope?", as test No. 1.

Q10 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** Thank you for that, Mark. I echo what my



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colleague Ian said about all the work that you have done. Have you started to capture any data so that we can look at lessons learned? If we do face another crisis like this, particularly with the care system, it is not going to vanish overnight—they are massively burdened. What are the lessons in terms of what we could be doing and in terms of the recovery stage straight after things start to ease down?

Mark Lloyd: That is a brilliant question. Your next session includes the president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services. We are working with ADASS to make sure that, with the Department of Health and Social Care, we have ways of capturing data and insights into the use of personal protective equipment, the way the care sector has responded overall, and the help that we have needed to provide to those very important providers of social care to make sure that they can cope in the short and medium term. I hope that Julie will be able to shine a light on those issues in your follow-on session.

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** I echo Clive's words about the brilliant work that local authorities have been doing up and down the country in this crisis. One of the areas that has been outstanding has been rising to the challenge of getting more rough sleepers off the streets and into temporary accommodation, but clearly it is a challenge. The Government have now issued edicts, quite rightly, that no one should be evicted from their home at the end of a lease or as a result of having arrears on mortgage or rent, which should mean less pressure on local authorities. First and foremost, have local authorities seen a reduction in the number of people presenting themselves as homeless during the current crisis?

Cllr Jamieson: If I may, I will answer in several respects. I think there are two issues: the number of people presenting, but also the number of opportunities to place people somewhere. I will have to get back to you on the exact figure for the increase or decrease in the number of people coming forward, but we are quite clearly still seeing a number of people coming forward and presenting as homeless. People who are sofa-surfing clearly cannot do that in the current environment, so we have seen continuing demand for our homelessness services. However, with lockdown, and with a lot of housing associations not taking on new tenants and there being not so many moves, we are seeing a reduction in supply. Across the country, councils have seen a significant increase in the cost of homelessness, because they are having to put people into temporary accommodation—hotels and so forth. That is another one of the pressures that we are seeing.

You touched on rough sleepers, which is close to my own heart. We have taken 6,000 people off the streets. That is 6,000 opportunities to improve people's lives, and it is really important that we are able to offer those wraparound drug and alcohol and mental health services to these people, yet we are doing it in particularly difficult circumstances, because frontline workers do not necessarily have PPE, and the wraparound services that we have are just not scaled up in many parts of the country to do this. They are used to dealing with a slightly different cohort.



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We have some excellent practice in places such as Westminster, in central London, with St Mungo's, but that facility is not available in many other parts of the country, particularly in the less urban areas, where they are not used to dealing with large numbers. One thing I would press for is more resources and more direction to give those wraparound services to the homeless, so that in three, six or eight weeks' time, or however long it is, we do not just have people going back to the street but have an opportunity to turn around some of those lives.

- Q12 **Bob Blackman:** That brings me to the next issue, which is, as you quite rightly say, that local authorities have accommodated large numbers of rough sleepers and people who are genuinely homeless in hotels. Those hotels will eventually want to go back to their normal business practice and will no longer be available for local authorities to house people in. What is the plan at the end of the period when hotels say, "Thank you very much. We have risen to the challenges well, but now we have to get back to our commercial activities, and we need to vacate the rooms that you have been using"? What happens then?

Cllr Jamieson: You are right that hotels will—probably not overnight—seek to decant some of these people, and you are right that we need to find somewhere. That is why I think it is important, working with housing associations, that we start creating some capacity that is currently blocked up because people are not moving and they are not emptying homes. I also know that, throughout the country, councils are looking at opportunities for more transitional accommodation, where we can house these people coming out of hotels, but it is ongoing work.

One helpful move by the Government was to relax procurement and planning legislation, not only for mortuaries and hospitals but also for temporary accommodation, and I know that, throughout the country, a number of councils are looking to create more temporary accommodation as a result.

- Q13 **Bob Blackman:** You also mentioned, effectively, Housing First as a route to assist people who have multiple problems, especially as a result of rough sleeping. Those trials have been going on for some time. The reports are that they are very successful, and clearly there is an opportunity to roll that out across the country. How prepared are local authorities to actually implement Housing First right across the country, to assist people who may be stuck in a hotel room, which may affect mental health problems, but for whom that is not incredibly helpful, and who need that package of support to assist them?

One argument at the moment is that some people are stuck in a hotel room, which is safe and secure, but there are no catering facilities or support; the hotel is basically just barren. There are no places to buy food or to get anything. Others have been given full access to hotel restaurants and such like. It seems to me that there are very different experiences in different parts of the country. However, it is about preparing the ground for that support. Are local authorities ready to provide the sort of full support required?



Cllr Jamieson: If I may, I will come back to it being not just about the accommodation but the drug and alcohol and mental health wraparound. That is somewhere where we need more support from the Government, the NHS and community health providers. This is not an easy bit of the equation, because we are dealing with people who have chaotic lives. This is not something that you can do remote by Zoom or Microsoft Teams: this is person-to-person contact with chaotic people who often do not necessarily respect social distancing, and that requires a special type of person. I did reference St Mungo's, who are doing a great job. We do not have that throughout the country, and that is something we need to work on, but we need Government support for that.

Q14 **Bob Blackman:** I have a couple of very brief questions before I pass over. I have had reports suggesting that local authorities are still, even despite the problems with rough sleeping and lockdown, taking into account the local connection before they will treat someone as being homeless in their area. I understand the position should have been that the local connection should be disregarded to get people into somewhere safe and secure. What evidence do you have from local authorities about how they are operating that particular rule on housing homeless people?

Cllr Jamieson: It is not something that has come to me, but Mark may be able to answer. I would say the other thing is that Government need to show—and are showing—some flexibility to those who have no recourse to public funds, which is another big issue with regard to homelessness.

Mark Lloyd: Like Councillor Jamieson, I have not had any issues raised with me about the issue Mr Blackman is raising. We are happy to take that offline. If he has particular instances he would like to share with us to follow up, we will of course do that.

Let me add one positive to this. I guess we are all looking to try and see some silver linings through the clouds of covid-19, and the fact that we have got so many rough sleepers into accommodation—albeit temporarily—might be one of those. We do need, as Mr Blackman said, to find ways of sustaining this approach into the long term so they do not return to the street. The good news is that Dame Louise Casey, who will have appeared before this Committee many times in the past, has been tasked with this particular issue, and I will be meeting with Dame Louise this week to make sure we tackle all of the points that Councillor Jamieson has made about alternative accommodation, wraparound support and so on. Central Government is sharing your ambition in this regard, Mr Blackman, and of course we in local government do too.

Q15 **Bob Blackman:** My final point is that there are allegations that in the rush to house people on a temporary basis, families and other people who are vulnerable have been housed in unsafe accommodation. What measures have local authorities taken to ensure that accommodation is physically safe for people who are housed temporarily?

Mark Lloyd: All the normal approaches would have applied in this situation, Mr Blackman. Again, if you have instances where you think that



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is not the case, Councillor Jamieson and I would be very happy to follow those up with the council leaders and chief executives on your behalf.

Q16 Abena Oppong-Asare: I think Bob has covered quite a lot of the points, but I just really wanted to delve in deeper. On 26 March, the Government announced guidance to local authorities, particularly in terms of helping people with homelessness, which you mentioned. It included no public recourse to funds. I just wanted to hear from you if you had heard from any council that was struggling particularly with providing support to those with no public recourse to funds, and what guidance you have given about the level of support in terms of helping them to address that.

Mark Lloyd: It is not an issue that has been raised consistently with me by council officers. I do not know whether Councillor Jamieson has had more points raised with him as a council leader, but he did reference the fact that the Government has adjusted its position around no recourse to public funds, which has proved helpful in most cases.

Mr Blackman mentioned families being accommodated in a rush. The other thing that I hope you could shine a light on as a Committee is whether those families that are in temporary accommodation might be one of the groups that are considered alongside critical workers and children who have social workers as having access to the schooling system, as a way of giving them some kind of underpinning in their lives while they are in temporary accommodation. That might be a helpful adaptation to the critical worker and vulnerable children approaches in schools.

Abena Oppong-Asare: Thank you.

Chair: We will move on to the next subject, which is victims of domestic abuse.

Q17 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Good morning, everybody. Has there been a noticeable increase in demand for access to refuges for people who have been victims of domestic abuse, and are local authorities meeting this need at the moment?

Mark Lloyd: A spike has been reported by all the agencies in the levels of domestic abuse. It is an abhorrent offence. We all link arms with all the survivors of abuse, and we want to ensure that they are supported.

While responding to domestic abuse is principally led by our colleagues in the police service, councils remain available to support people during this time. We have been very quick in all our local communications to make it clear that fleeing domestic abuse is an appropriate reason to leave your home, and if you do want to leave your home, councils are there to provide victims of abuse with all of the support they need, and we will link them in with all the local agencies. This is one of the dreadful aspects of the lockdown that we are all concerned about, and a consequence of it. Councils remain concerned about supporting people who are suffering in this particular instance.



If I may, I will add a footnote to that. We have also seen a decline in the number of referrals to councils to children's social care. It is normally around 1,800 a day. Some councils are reporting a 25% to 50% drop-off in the number of referrals. We think it is unlikely that households are in greater harmony now. We think that there might be issues around hidden neglect or abuse of children, which is of equal concern for us. If the Committee could shine a light on that matter, along with the Children's Commissioner, we would make common cause with you on that, to ensure that we minimise the amount of abuse going on in our communities.

Q18 Brendan Clarke-Smith: Thank you very much for that. Councillor Jamieson, what is your opinion?

Cllr Jamieson: I share Mark's opinion on domestic abuse. There has been a spike, which is not entirely surprising, given that families are in lockdown. I would reiterate the one issue that is concerning me a lot, which is the safeguarding of children, particularly those who are on child protection or children in need plans. While the majority of those children are probably going to school, not all of them are. Seeing children outside of the home setting is one way that we pick up where there are issues. Anything the Committee can do to shine a light on that and encourage it would be good.

Chair: We will move on to issues of bereavement, which are clearly very difficult in the current circumstances.

Q19 Paul Holmes: Obviously, one of the unfortunate side effects of this crisis is that we will have deaths from covid-19, but we also need to focus on the wraparound support services for families and loved ones who have lost relatives in this crisis. Do councils and local resilience forums have all they need to ensure that those who unfortunately die have dignified deaths and funerals? After we have addressed that, I will come on to two specific aspects. Councillor Jamieson, could you respond first?

Cllr Jamieson: Clearly this is a very difficult aspect of this crisis. Unfortunately, we are not able to have normal funerals, as we have had in the past. We are having to be practical with social distancing. I know that councils throughout the country are trying to be respectful and have close family attend funerals, as well as the various religious aspects of funerals throughout the country, which raise complications. There is a variation between six and 15 people being able to attend funerals. In many cases that is simply down to the logistics of that crematorium or church regarding what is safe. But we are keen to do whatever we can to help bereaved families at this difficult time.

Q20 Paul Holmes: Mark, do you think LRFs have all the guidance they need?

Mark Lloyd: That issue has been helpfully clarified more recently. There was some confusion around whether burial grounds and crematoriums should or should not be open—the Government have clarified their position and said that they should. To the best of our knowledge, councils are willingly complying with that requirement. They recognise the importance of individuals being able to attend funerals and committals. I can think of



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only two examples across the country of crematoriums that did not feel able, because of social distancing, to have mourners inside. All the rest are operating—albeit with limited capacity—and allowing people to be there at this important transition point for families.

- Q21 Paul Holmes:** As the death toll is sadly increasing, a number of local authorities, and particularly LRFs, will have to look at storage facilities. In my own constituency, Hampshire County Council has been particularly good at identifying facilities such as Southampton airport, which is now being used as a temporary mortuary. Have you picked up any patches in provision, and are councils concerned about identifying sufficient storage facilities across the country?

Mark Lloyd: If I may, Councillor Jamieson, councils—rightly, in this regard—plan for the worst and absolutely hope for the best. Based on some of the early evidence coming out of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, councils made sure that they had mortuary capacity that could cope with a peak of the epidemic that was way higher—thankfully—than what we have experienced.

I do not have concerns, as I sit here, about mortuary provision across the country. I think that most areas, through their LRFs, have responded in the way that you report in your area. The issue has been more about the costs associated with the provision of those mortuaries, which are very, very substantial, and make a significant draw upon the resources that councils have been allocated and already had in their budgets.

- Q22 Paul Holmes:** Councillor Jamieson, do you have anything to add?

Cllr Jamieson: No, I agree with Mark; we have planned mortuary facilities throughout the country. They are expensive—if they are available—and, thankfully, they are not going to be used to the extent that we feared at one point.

- Q23 Paul Holmes:** Thank you very much. I have one final question, which Mark answered slightly, in terms of the guidance issued by councils on burial sites and allowing them to be open. As you have outlined, there has been some criticism of the Government, particularly on the guidance concerning funerals, parks and the opening of cemeteries. Aside from those that you have already mentioned, are there areas where further guidance is needed or where your colleagues in local authorities are still struggling with a lack of guidance or non-specific guidance?

Mark Lloyd: As I sit here this morning, no, but things could change by lunchtime. Again, an important postscript to your point is that there has been a lot of coverage around councils allegedly not opening parks. There are something like 20,000 parks and green spaces across the country, but I think potentially the focus has been on one park. Plus, some councils have decided that, because people drive to them, their country parks should have their car parks closed, but should remain open for pedestrian access. They have done a much better job than you would believe if you focused on the media coverage.



Chair: I thank both our witnesses, Mark and James, for their contributions to our discussions this morning—it has been really helpful. I say once again, on behalf of the Committee, please take our best wishes and congratulations back to all your members and workforce for what they are doing for our communities up and down the country. You have both joined us this morning and I am sure that you will find the Committee ready and willing to do anything we can to help you in the very important work that you do on behalf of all of us. Thank you very much indeed.

Mark Lloyd: Thank you, Chairman; thank you, Committee.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rob Whiteman, Julie Ogley and Jim McManus.

Q24 **Chair:** We will now resume our Committee hearing on the response of local government to the covid emergency and how it is meeting the challenges before it. We have a second panel of three witnesses: Rob Whiteman, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy; Julie Ogley, president of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services; and Jim McManus, vice-president of the Association of Directors of Public Health. They cover three very important areas that we want to explore, in terms of how local government is dealing with the crisis.

I begin with Jim McManus. There has been a lot of talk recently about how we should get out of the lockdown, and a recognition that to do that successfully requires much more testing, which has been very much in the news, but also the tracing and tracking of contacts, to make sure that we focus on where the infection is and who may have been infected. Clearly, it looks as though public health and environmental health officers could play an important part in that, but it is very unclear whether the Government have been talking to local authorities—the LGA said that they had not at present—or, indeed, to your association and to directors of public health at local level. Is that happening?

Jim McManus: There are conversations between the Association of Directors of Public Health and Public Health England. As directors of public health, our view is that we have lengthy experience in contact tracing, as do some of the services we commission. So do environmental health officers.

Our view has remained consistently that the best way to run this is to take a whole-systems approach, where everybody plays their part. The NHS does valiant things and has done amazing things, but it cannot do this on its own. Central Government cannot do this on its own, because it does not understand local areas. In order for this to work and get off the ground quickly, which we will need it to, we need everyone to work together.



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Local directors of public health can bring local knowledge, links to local authorities—ensuring that people get food parcels if they are self-isolating—and a variety of other things. I think it is starting, but we need to start with partnership first. That message needs to be local and national together, if we want to make this a success. That is what directors of public health have been calling for.

Q25 **Chair:** So having a national phone bank and apps on some people's phones is not going to deal with this.

Jim McManus: No, you need local expertise. If you have people who are not on the phone—if, for example, you have Traveller communities—the people who know those communities are local authorities. This cannot be done by local government alone, because we haven't got everything we need, but it cannot be done by the national Government alone either, because they haven't got everything we need. We must work together to make this happen, and the director of public health needs to be a key linchpin. We have 160 years' experience of doing this kind of thing.

Q26 **Chair:** So the message is: start talking to us quickly about getting this partnership going.

Jim McManus: Yes, and root and branch from the very beginning—from design to implementation, we need to be in there.

Q27 **Chair:** So you don't want a national scheme handed down to you; you want to be able to design the scheme together with the national bodies.

Jim McManus: Absolutely, because there are some places where we can circumvent what might take national agencies a while. Many local authorities have call centres, and quite a large number of local authorities have online testing for HIV and sexual health. We could lever capabilities into this that would complement very well the national capabilities being designed by the Government.

Q28 **Chair:** Thank you for that. We now move on to look at local government finances. Rob Whiteman, I don't know whether you heard the conversations that we had with the LGA. They seem to think that the Government are now minded to provide the money, rather than to go to a burden-sharing position. What do you want to tell us about your view of the situation at present?

Rob Whiteman: I think the most important thing at the moment would be certainty. Over the last couple of weeks, there have been some mixed messages. In the first instance, councils were told that, whatever the costs associated with responding to the crisis would be, they would be met. Then we had some comments around burden sharing, which has made councils fearful that the full costs won't be met.

At the moment, councils are grateful that we have seen two lots of £1.6 billion announced. That has helped both in cash flow terms and in budget terms, and I will say just a little bit about that. Essentially, there is the element of cost, but we must remember that there is the element of income. Some councils are seeing their income collapsing or greatly



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falling—for example, from car park charging or other fees and charging, such as for leisure and so forth.

Clearly, councils are worried about their cash flow at the moment, and they are ultimately worried about their budgets. The comments about burden sharing did alarm councils. At the moment, they are grateful for the help that they are receiving, but they still have some concerns.

- Q29 **Chair:** We will move on to the income loss in due course. Before I bring Bob Blackman in with some specific questions on finance, the LGA was saying to us earlier that they would rather hope for a pause to some of the major changes to fair funding, business rate retention and so on for the rest of this year. Is that a reasonable way forward: concentrating on the financial difficulties of the here and now and, while recognising that changes will have to come in due course, not trying to address those changes immediately?

Rob Whiteman: That is right, Chair. We do not know what service provision will look like on the other side of this crisis. I think we all assume a greater call on services for vulnerable people than before we went into the crisis, so a fair funding review would need to reflect the new pattern of service provision post the covid crisis. If it were done now, it would take a lot of time and use up bandwidth, rather than dealing with the crisis. It might also come to the wrong result if the context of service provision has changed.

- Q30 **Bob Blackman:** Rob, one of the issues that was covered with the LGA, and you, was the precarious nature of some local authorities, which may be in a position whereby their treasurers or finance directors—call them what you will—are on the point of saying, “We need to stop certain services in order to fund the services provided through the crisis.”

One of the benefits of being on this Committee over several Parliaments is that I get to see witnesses time and time again. A year ago, you gave evidence to this Committee, saying that 10% to 15% of local authorities were at risk of needing to issue a section 114 notice. What is your assessment now, given the amount of money that local authorities are having to spend during this crisis?

Rob Whiteman: The risk and that number are greater now. The National Audit Office, as well as CIPFA, thought that over the next three years, 10% of councils could be at risk of being in that statutory position of a 114 notice. The risk is greater now, because council expenditure has gone up considerably during the crisis. As I said earlier in response to the Chair, councils can see that their income is falling as well.

It would be disastrous for section 114 notices to be issued at the moment, because we don't want to freeze expenditure in the midst of a crisis, and yet 114 notices remain the statutory position if a council's budget is to be in balance. We are doing work with MHCLG, the Treasury and other partners in the sector such as the LGA to give advice to section 151 officers to say, “If your council is in a 114 position, in the first instance talk to Government to see if you can have assistance, as has been



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promised by Government for the crisis, rather than issuing a 114 notice.” We hope to issue some guidance on that in the next week or two, and we have already drafted something.

As things stand at the moment, a larger amount of councils are in that position.

Q31 **Bob Blackman:** Are there any particular—*[Inaudible.]*—we should be looking at in this regard?

Rob Whiteman: I did not quite hear the question, sorry—was it “any particular councils”?

Bob Blackman: One of the issues that was raised in the previous session was that small district councils which collect large amounts of revenue on behalf of higher-tier authorities have serious cash-flow problems. Is that the area of risk, or is it metropolitan authorities or a mixture? Who is it that we should be looking at as a Committee?

Rob Whiteman: It is a mixture. Metropolitan ones and counties—top-tier authorities—are bearing the greatest risk in regard to additional expenditure.

On the other hand, districts still have very great pressures, for example around housing, but many of their pressures are on income rather than on expenditure, and so those two things are different. What we want to see is those issues being dealt with through the distribution of resources that the Department is giving.

We thought that how the latest £1.6 billion would be distributed would be announced last week, but the Department put a hold on that at the weekend. I think that over the weekend and the next day or two, it is just looking at whether the distribution will be the same as last time or different. There is a rumour, Mr Blackman, that the Department are looking at maybe giving a little bit more to districts in the second tranche of money than they did in the first tranche, and we are just waiting to see if that is the case. However, I do not think this will be enough. I think there will be more pressures and more funding will be needed in due course. Those issues need looking at—both expenditure and income.

Finally, some councils will have some very particular issues—not general issues about providing services and responding to the crisis, but particular holes that may emerge in their budget. I heard in the evidence session earlier, for example, about councils that own airports or arenas, or that have large investments that usually provide income for them. There may be some specific cases where individual councils have to talk to the Treasury and the Department about holes that are occurring in their budget because of some of their large investments.

Q32 **Bob Blackman:** Okay. The final question from me. Obviously, CIPFA issues guidance on the level of reserves that should be retained and the ability of councils to respond, but what is your assessment at the moment of the level of reserves that local authorities have to enable them to deal



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with the cash-flow crisis that they will undoubtedly encounter, if not now then certainly over the next few weeks?

Rob Whiteman: CIPFA publishes the resilience index, which looks at a number of financial metrics, including reserves. In the year before the crisis, a third of councils had reduced their level of reserves, and perhaps that was not surprising, bearing in mind the context of their finances before this. The sums being spoken about at the moment are so material that I think many councils will not have the reserves to cover them. I assume that, in the way that Government have given two tranches of £1.6 billion, it will give some further funding, because reserves will not be adequate to cover this.

Finally on this, Mr Blackman, I think that this year's budget round in the autumn, when councils are planning the budget for next year—2021—and onwards, will be pretty tough, because in medium-term financial strategies a lot of the savings that councils assume they will make will in years 2, 3 and 4 will not get delivered. In particular, a lot of savings are due from adult social care, for example, which I do not think will materialise. It will be very difficult to reconfigure services in the wake of the covid-19 crisis. We are assuming that this will be a very difficult budget round in the autumn and that many more councils will have insufficient reserves than when we came into the crisis.

Chair: Thank you. Mohammad Yasin.

Q33 **Mohammad Yasin:** Mr Whiteman, there has been criticism by the IFS of how covid-19 money has been distributed to different councils. For instance, Bedford Borough Council in my constituency is a unitary authority and therefore covers extra costs. Will these kinds of differences be recognised and will the approach taken be fair to all types of councils?

Rob Whiteman: I think the IFS research is right that the means of distribution has not necessarily hit all the right parts. However, that is the means of distribution that we have at the moment, and as I said in answer to Mr Blackman's question, to change the mechanism of distribution midway through a crisis would be very difficult. So I think we have to stick with the distribution that we have, but then look for where it does not work, so the Government sees how effective the distribution is and then fills particular gaps in the next tranches of money that come through.

Certainly, there is a fair case for saying that some councils have not been particularly well favoured, and that the money they have had has not covered the additional expenditure so far on covid-19.

It is difficult to change a distribution methodology mid-crisis. We would do better to stick with that methodology, accept that it does not fully work, and then come up with a means of correcting that. I think that is where the Government are and what they are trying to do.

Q34 **Mohammad Yasin:** Before the crisis began, the Government released proposals for a new funding formula, as you touched on. What is your assessment of it? Would it be more appropriate to use?



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Rob Whiteman: I think the real problem is quantum. Local government will need more quantum and more resource. I thought that before the crisis. The risk of the fair funding formula is that you are re-cutting the cake. I am old in the tooth and I have seen Governments over the decades redistribute from one part of local government to another, and often, in effect, robbing Peter to pay Paul. My worry about the fair funding approach is that it will give some councils more resource relatively, but at the expense of others, at a time when really the sector needs more resource. It needs a solution to the social care problem, which was true before we came into this crisis. It needs access to further forms of income than being very reliant on retained business rates and council tax.

There are some big issues for local government finance that need addressing. A fair funding review is just re-cutting the cake a bit. The real issue is, what is the quantum before that? I would rather see the quantum addressed, and then a fair funding formula could look at how that new quantum was distributed. I worry slightly that a fair funding review will damage some councils if it is in the absence of actually looking at the quantum.

Q35 **Mohammad Yasin:** Ms Ogley, what is your view on that? Mr Whiteman touched on the social care funding formula.

Julie Ogley: I think we at ADASS have been very consistent in saying that there is insufficient funding in adult social care. We made a position statement before covid-19 that we need funding for the short term to be sustainable, we need a long-term funding agreement, and we need a long-term plan for adult social care. I agree with Mr Whiteman that it is about additional resource into local government, but specifically for me, into adult social care.

Q36 **Mohammad Yasin:** Mr Whiteman, what is your view on whether councils will be fully reimbursed for extra costs and also losses, such as the significant costs of delayed programmes?

Rob Whiteman: Well, that is a real risk now. Councils are receiving money for costs. From talking to large authorities, I know the money they have had through the two tranches has still not covered their costs, but it has gone a long way towards that and has assuaged their worries about immediate cash flow. Clearly, however, in the medium and longer term, they will see the deferral of programmes and the deferral of income.

The bottom line is that local government finance was already in a precarious position before this crisis. Councils are doing a Herculean job and a fantastic job, but they did not have much capacity or bandwidth. The crisis exposes that when we are on the other side of it, councils will not have the resources they need, because expenditure will be up and income will be down, and it will be a very different world for a number of services.

Chair: Perhaps we can move on now to Rachel Hopkins, who will ask about that fall in income.



Q37 **Rachel Hopkins:** Mr Whiteman, we have heard, and you have already touched on it, that 90% of the budgetary pressures facing district councils result from losses in revenue. Can you expand a bit more on whether you feel that reflects the wider trend across all local authorities?

Rob Whiteman: Some income will be a cash-flow problem, and on an accruals basis it may be that ultimately the budget is met. Let's say, for example, council tax income will be down at the moment. Many people will find it hard to pay their instalments in April, May and June, but ultimately later in the year, those instalments may be paid, so on an accruals basis a lot of the budget is still being met even though there has been a cash-flow problem.

However, clearly some income is just going to be lost: money on car parks, or fees and charges. A whole range of things is gone, and leaves a hole in the budget while councils have been employing staff to do those things. All councils are hit by loss of income, but districts are particularly hit by loss of income because it can form a material part of their budget. For very large councils—unitaries or counties—income may be 5%, 10%, 15% or 20% of their budget, in terms of fees and charges. For districts, it is not unusual for those things to be 50% or 60% of their budget, so they are particularly vulnerable to loss of income.

Q38 **Rachel Hopkins:** Just building on income, you may have heard my question to the previous panel about commercial income. Different councils, in response to having to look at other income streams, have increased commercial activities, traded services or wholly owned companies: for example, Luton airport has a revenue stream that goes into Luton council. Would you agree that the Government must consider those income streams that have been significantly impacted as well in any support settlement going forward?

Rob Whiteman: Yes, very much. Local government has got a bad press around some of its commercial income over the past year or two, and I think that was right in relation to a small number of councils. CIPFA has worked with the Treasury and CLG, and as a Committee you will have seen that in the last Budget, PWLB is no longer available for commercial investment. We welcome that; public borrowing is used to provide services or to regenerate areas.

The majority of councils, over a number of decades, have made sensible commercial investments. First of all, it is not always through borrowing: some councils' airports were acquired with cash reserves, for example. Councils have made good use of commercial income over a number of years. A small number of councils have exposed themselves to undue risk, and that is why over the past year, the prudential code has been greatly tightened up and PWLB is now not available for commercial investment.

I really hope that that small number of councils does not cloud the overall picture that most councils have made sensible and prudent use of investment. It provides valuable commercial income, and the Government will now have to look at that, because some councils—you mentioned your



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own there—are going to have a hole in their budget caused by commercial income falling. It will not be that they have acted badly; it will be that they are in that majority of councils that have acted in a commercially prudent way, but the economy is now a very different place and they will need some specific support to cover those investments.

- Q39 **Rachel Hopkins:** The Government have introduced various schemes to give relief to businesses, notably in retail and other hard-hit areas like that, and they have set up a hardship fund for council tax. The business rate reliefs have been estimated to cost between £10 billion and £13 billion. Are the Government giving enough relief to councils to compensate them for this lost revenue?

Rob Whiteman: At this stage, it would appear so. Of course, I heard in the evidence session earlier that the drawing down of those resources and paying them to businesses varies across councils at the moment, and I heard Mr Lloyd give some of the reasons for that about the nature of local economies. At the moment, I think councils have adequate resource to be able to administer those schemes, but the points made in the earlier session are true as well. Remember, councils have often cut their support services to the bone and therefore are running on quite tight resources, so suddenly administering this scheme is not without issue. However, councils are reporting that they do feel they have the wherewithal to deliver it at the moment.

- Q40 **Rachel Hopkins:** Just a final additional push around district councils being nervous about having to pay their precepting councils, normally county councils. As this is based on their budgetary estimates and not on the amount of revenue they actually raise, will this leave district councils short?

Rob Whiteman: Yes, it will. We need to have a discussion between districts and counties and with Government, but my hunch is that it would be better to go ahead and pay the precepts that are due, and then we look overall to see what are the pressures in districts and what are the pressures in counties, and Government compensates for that. If we start to get intra-sector money being owed from one bit of the sector to another because precepts were not being paid, it would confuse the picture of where the real financial pressures lie. I really understand districts' fears about cash flow, but I think it would be better that bits of the sector do not owe each other money and that we go ahead and make the normal arrangements, even though they do not appear great at the moment; in that way, the precepts are paid and then we look at where that leaves the districts.

Chair: We will now move on to look at the issues of social care, which is obviously really important in the context of the response of local government to covid-19. Mohammad Yasin will lead on the questions.

- Q41 **Mohammad Yasin:** I think this question was touched on during the first session. Ms Ogley, how would you assess the performance of local resilience forums in ensuring the front-line staff have the PPE and other



equipment that they need?

Julie Ogley: I will start by acknowledging the hard work of the local resilience forums. As Mr Lloyd said earlier, it was not their original task to sort out PPE, and they have done really well to help particularly care providers in my area get access to PPE. Generally speaking, care providers would not use the level of PPE that is now required. The system for care providers accessing PPE is not through the national NHS procurement group—it is not the same as the NHS procurement system. They make their own arrangements through suppliers. Generally speaking, they would use much less PPE than is required of them now, so it is not surprising that that route very quickly began to be overwhelmed. Local resilience forums stood in their stead and arranged for local care providers to access PPE following national distribution. It is a challenge, I have to say, in terms of making sure that care providers have the right stock. I know that councils are working very hard around mutual aid, and care providers are sharing kit to make sure that it goes to those that need it most.

Q42 **Mohammad Yasin:** Thank you. Can I ask a supplementary question about PPE? Do you think enough is being done to help individuals to receive care in their homes?

Julie Ogley: What ADASS has said is that there are two fronts. Obviously there is the NHS front, but if we want to prevent the NHS being overwhelmed, we have to work really hard on where people actually receive care. We know about the care homes, and no doubt you will want to ask me about those later, but there are more people receiving care at home or in other circumstances. I think we have come to that a little bit later than would have been helpful. We must now concentrate on ensuring that those people—they might be family carers as well as paid carers—get access to the right sort of PPE, but also other sorts of support from our community health and social care colleagues.

Q43 **Mohammad Yasin:** One final question: do you think that enough has been done to assist working-age individuals and their families who rely on the care system?

Julie Ogley: I think the focus has been around older people, because that is where the numbers are in terms of receiving social care support and, quite frankly, there are more older people living in care homes. It is vital, though, that we remember working-age adults and their families and their carers and that we support those people as well. ADASS is saying that we need to think about everybody who requires care and support, no matter where they are living; that they should all get access to equipment but also to the right sorts of other support, from primary care, community health and social care.

Chair: We have a follow-up question from Abena Oppong-Asare.

Q44 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** Thanks for making those points, Julie. I completely agree with you—particularly on the London resilience forum. Particularly in my area in Greenwich, we have had to spend a lot of time doing public call-outs asking people to distribute PPE; there was urgent



need because there was nothing supplied for the care system. There has been a lot of focus particularly on PPE equipment and testing, and quite rightly so, but do you think there are other areas that are lacking in terms of support? You touched on it lightly. One of the questions I am concerned about is whether there is enough support, particularly individual support, in terms of mental health support and helping people to deal with their mental wellbeing. You mentioned people who rely on the care system who live at home, and some of those individuals may live by themselves. How are they coping? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Julie Ogley: I think you are really right in what you are asking me. Our initial response and the national response has been around the big issues—around PPE and now, of course, testing, and making that accessible to everyone in their own locations. We are now beginning to see the impacts of lockdown. I was listening earlier to the comments about rising domestic abuse and violence, and I am also aware of rising suicides among younger people. As this emergency is prolonged, we have to pay more attention to those sorts of requirements. We have been thinking about the social care workforce, of course, and the impact of working in the environment that people are currently working in, but I am mindful that along with the NHS, we now really need to think about people’s mental health and wellbeing.

Q45 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** That is really helpful. To follow on, you touched on the workforce: Care England has said about two thirds of individuals have basically gone into self-isolation or have had symptoms of covid. One of the things that I am particularly concerned about is the lack of discussion about whether the care system can actually function and cope right now. I am hearing of care homes literally operating on a piece of thread because they just don’t have the staff.

Julie Ogley: I think it is a great challenge. An emergency is usually a short-lived event, but this is not; it is really prolonged. What I would say is the care system is working really well, so a big thank you to all those care workers who are supporting very vulnerable people, but I think you are right. We started this crisis with issues in terms of the social care workforce. We have a high vacancy level and we have very high turnover in adult social care. That is one of the reasons we recently wrote to Dominic Raab to ask him to reconsider the Immigration Bill. At the moment, there is an income threshold of about £26,500 per year, but care workers do not receive that sort of funding or pay. We are asking that that is reconsidered, so that care workers can come in to the country to help an already very stressed workforce.

Abena Oppong-Asare: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Q46 **Chair:** Julie, you have been quite mild in your comments this morning. Two weeks ago, your association wrote to the Government and described the whole issue of PPE—or the lack of it—and its distribution as shambolic. They were the words you used, weren’t they? Do you stand by those words?



Julie Ogley: Chair, that was a private letter to a civil servant and I was expressing the concerns of the members. I actually said “shambolic” and “haphazard”, to give the quote. I think you heard Mark Lloyd earlier talk about the issues around PPE and getting the distribution system right. It has felt very disorganised on the ground. That is not to say that Government colleagues and local government colleagues are not working very hard; people are working very hard all the time to ensure that care providers get the PPE kit that is required, but it is a real challenge.

Q47 **Chair:** But they are not getting it, are they? The reality is that many workers are going into people’s homes without the necessary protective equipment either for themselves or for the clients they are visiting. That is still the case, isn’t it?

Julie Ogley: I don’t think that actually is the case. I think that there is a lot of myth around what sort of PPE should be worn at what time. Of course we have had guidance from Public Health England, but there has been quite a lot of guidance, and if you are a relatively small care provider, I can imagine that it would be quite challenging to keep on top of that guidance.

I certainly know from my own experience that people receiving care have expected care workers to turn up in full PPE gear, when actually that is not required. With all the national publicity around PPE, I think we have had some very odd expectations of what is actually required. I am not saying, of course, that care homes in particular have not struggled to get access to PPE; I do know that that is the case and continues to be the case.

Chair: Let’s move on. Mary Robinson.

Q48 **Mary Robinson:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to address my questions to Rob Whiteman, please. Rob, in times like these, with a crisis such as covid-19, it is hugely important that the money and support that are available be directed to the people who need it as quickly as possible. What is your assessment of the speed with which local authorities have been able to distribute the money that is needed from the social care package to the people who need it?

Rob Whiteman: I think that local authorities are making a good job of it on the whole. That is not to say that there are not issues; without repeating what I said earlier, when a crisis comes along, it is particularly hard to deal with if the context for it has been cutting services and capacity to the bone. When all this is over, I suspect that there will be a question about whether public services should operate with a bit more general resilience than they have been allowed to, because sometimes things do go wrong and we do have crises.

What all this has exposed is that a lot of public services were running on a very low fuel tank, which in a way has made responding to the crisis harder. That said, with the hardship fund, councils are making every effort to look after the people who are most vulnerable. Councils are trying to make the relief to small businesses and to the hospitality sector available as soon as possible. They are trying to process the range of benefits and



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support that they give to the public. Overall, I think that they are doing a good job, but that is not to say that there are not differences in performance across councils—although, as Mr Lloyd said in the earlier session, that may be because demography or the nature of the business community can vary considerably between areas.

Q49 Mary Robinson: As we go forward, councils will have wage pressures, too. There is due to be an increase in the national living wage, which of course will include a great number of people who are in the care sector. Can the sector cope with the additional cost that that increase will introduce?

Rob Whiteman: I am a seasoned old hard-nosed accountant who does not say these things easily, but I am in no doubt that care workers' pay will need to go up for the market conditions that exist. Councils will not have the resource to cover that, but they will have to make more money available to providers and to staff, and they will need the resources to do that. I think in Scotland care worker pay has already been looked at; in England, so far, they get a badge.

As I say, I don't say these things lightly, because if pay and costs go up it would make the position worse for councils. Inexorably, there are going to be pressures for them to go up. The previous set of questions about the effect of, perhaps, future immigration policy on the sector may also bring that to bear. I think we have to have a grown-up conversation about this. Realistically, costs are going to go up, and that would be disastrous if they are not covered, so how are they going to be covered?

Q50 Mary Robinson: We touched on this in the earlier questions. There has been a long-running debate about how to reform social care, how to fund it and so on. Without going into that in too much detail, how much do you think the challenges of the current situation are a consequence of failures over the past two decades to grasp that nettle?

Rob Whiteman: Considerable. Like many people, I have been researching other countries to see what has been going on. I have been reading a great deal about Germany recently and their ability to test locally, to provide social care and to support care homes. To use that as an example, I am in no doubt that there is a stronger form of localism there that has allowed local government to be able to have a right to do things and raise taxes and incomes to do it. That has been part of Germany's response.

In England, we have a system where councils can't do anything unless they get permission to do so, and they can't raise money to do things for which they don't have permission. I genuinely think that we will have to come out of this and ask, "What is the role of local government? What does it have? How is it funded?" I think we are rather exposed, given the position we have got into.

Q51 Mary Robinson: Do you think that, separately from the cross-party talks and discussions that we are going to have on this, it also needs to be included within the discussion about devolution?

Rob Whiteman: Yes. Without going into it greatly, the best report ever on local government finance was Layfield in 1976, because Layfield said, very simply, “First of all decide what local government is for, and then decide how you are going to fund it.” I think local government should be responsible for social care. It makes sense for these things to be provided locally, and to be joined up with housing, skills and lots of other agendas. But they are not fundable in the longer term just from property taxes on council flats and businesses.

Sticking to the Layfield methodology, if local government is going to have responsibility for this area, you need to look at which taxes and forms of income it has. I think councils will need the ability to have access to a wider set of taxes—some income tax, or some VAT or sales taxes. Local government needs access to a plurality of funding sources, because property taxes on their own are not enough in the medium term to fund social care, given the demography that is going to happen in the decades ahead.

Chair: Ian Byrne, I think we are going to move on to your issues. Perhaps you would like to bring Julie Ogley in to address some of these points. I think that would be helpful.

Q52 **Ian Byrne:** I won’t stick to the question, because Rob has covered it, really, with regard to decent pay for care workers. Thanks for that, Mary. Julie, Care England has warned that there is a ticking time bomb of increased cost resulting from the covid-19 crisis. What is your assessment of the sustainability of the care sector after this crisis?

Julie Ogley: I think it is fair to say that we entered this crisis on a shaky platform, in terms of the funding for adult social care. That has not abated. We really do need nationally to sort out how we are going to fund adult social care. The conversation so far has shown that the care workers who provide such excellent care are some of the most underpaid colleagues in the workforce, and they aren’t really recognised, in terms of their input.

They are regarded as being unskilled, I would submit, because they don’t have a professional qualification. I would say that they are very skilled; it is just that there isn’t that professional qualification. They have shown the absolute value that they have, and that social care has in the fabric of our society, in helping to keep the most vulnerable members of our community safe.

To add to what Mr Whiteman was saying, I think that we need a national conversation. That is where Germany and Japan perhaps have benefited, in that they had a national conversation and asked, “How are we going to support vulnerable members of our community and how are we going to fund that?” That would be my personal recommendation, but I think it is something that ADASS would rally around as well.

I think we will come out of this pandemic in the same place in which we entered it on social care, but that is true across local government and



public services. What will be interesting is what we have learned. The use of technology and how we are appearing before you today is one of the steps forward, but what does this mean, and what do we expect for how social care is funded and delivered? I think that is going to be a really big question for us.

Chair: Ian, do you want to follow up? I think we have lost the connection with Ian. Sorry about that. We have these technical difficulties and this doesn't work absolutely smoothly. We will move on to look at some issues about the right public health agenda, and Rachel Hopkins wants to lead off on these questions.

Q53 Rachel Hopkins: Jim McManus, I will start with you. When it comes to formulating local responses to the mental health challenges posed by covid-19, your organisation calls for a whole-systems approach that adopts an evidence-based approach and identifies local needs and at-risk groups. To bring these abstract principles to life, can you give some examples of how local authorities have put them into operation?

Jim McManus: For me, the first of the biggest two examples is adult social care. The public health importance of adult social care should not be underestimated. I am talking about the social care workforce and their stresses—keeping carers and people using care resilient and stable and sustainable. A lot of work has gone on in terms of supporting people working in adult social care.

Another example is children. We know that off the back of a pandemic comes a wave of mental ill health that is avoidable. I am very concerned about making sure that when our health visitors and other services can get back to the new normal, they can do as much as possible to sustain children through this. Otherwise, we will get epidemics of avoidable mental ill health in children and their parents.

Let me mention some of the stuff going on currently. There is work in schools on mindfulness. There are guides to resilience. There are social media campaigns. There is a range of other things. The LGA and the ADPH have stood up a national mental health collaborative, as well as PHE having stood up a national expert reference group. I could probably point you to work on mental health by about 60 agencies—including the British Psychological Society and the Centre for Mental Health, which are doing a great deal of work—and HR officers.

That is in a nutshell—forgive me for putting so much detail in there—some of the stuff that we are doing on mental health. I don't know whether you want to come back on that. I can give more detail if that will help.

Q54 Rachel Hopkins: I think the key thing, which you have already started talking about, is the longer-term impact of covid-19 on mental health, particularly with regard to potential depression and PTSD. Are there any measures that can be taken now to support the medium and long-term mitigation of the harm to people's mental health?



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Jim McManus: Yes, I think there are. I think the first thing is, and there is a huge role for local councillors in, promoting prosocial behaviour and resilience. They are best placed in their communities to do that, as are school governors.

The second thing is looking after the mental health of people on the frontline—our key workers. The Public Sector People Managers Association has done a great deal on that.

The third thing we can do is to frame the measures we are taking not as lockdown but as measures out of charity to protect and care for everybody else—we are all in this together. We know that can help.

The fourth thing is to provide people with tips on how to cope with these measures, because we know from the evidence that they can help.

The fifth thing is to be ready to spot the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and intervene early. If I may give a local example, in Hertfordshire we have an additional 60 people trained to provide first response to PTSD symptoms in the community, and we are looking at training many more. There are huge things that we can do. In fact, there is a road map that people can use.

Q55 **Rachel Hopkins:** Thank you. Rob, did you want to say something?

Rob Whiteman: In the run-up to this crisis, we know that prevention often got cut and that preventive services were the taps that were easiest to turn off for budget purposes. When we come out of this crisis, let's really look at prevention. Do we know how much is being spent on prevention? Do we define what it is? We all know that more money should be spent on mental health, on the aspects of social care that are preventive, on good public housing and on youth services, but we know that these things tended to be cut as often non-statutory services.

I really hope that we can focus on prevention when we come out of this crisis, because it is something that the UK is not as good at as some other systems or countries are. We must not just "chase the ambulances" by looking at what is most going wrong today and spending money on it. The truth is that we could make a much better job of prevention if, as Mr McManus said, we took a whole-systems approach, invested and measured prevention, and then saw its effects over a period of time.

Q56 **Chair:** Jim, do you want to follow up on that?

Jim McManus: Yes, if I may. Mr Whiteman has been looking over my shoulder and taking my notes, as ever. He has exceptionally eloquently made the point that we have taken out the preventive infrastructure of much of our county—the youth service, the youth justice service and a range of other things, such as prevention in social care. We have to get back to that. For all the great work that the NHS does, one of the things that this pandemic has exposed is that, without local government, the country would not get through this. That is not to detract from the NHS in any way; it is to say that we all need each other to get through these



things. The preventive capabilities of local government are absolutely crucial for when the next pandemic comes, because come it will.

- Q57 **Rachel Hopkins:** I wholeheartedly agree with you, and I declare an interest as a sitting councillor. Something you have touched on is that we have had thousands of volunteers who have been ready to help the lonely and the vulnerable. How effective have been the attempts to identify the people who need this help?

Jim McManus: From my experience, the most effective areas have been where national and local have worked together hand in glove. The worst thing would be 152 local systems all doing their own thing. The other worst thing would be one national system that does not use local capabilities. Where volunteers, local councils and other capabilities have worked together, that has been great. I would say that the hospice world—I declare an interest as a hospice trustee—has been somewhat left out of this and the capabilities it could give, and it has been under particular stress and strain. Where you see local volunteers using existing infrastructure and delivering food parcels, in my experience that has happened faster and quicker. Where national organisations have been willing to work with that, it has worked really well. Again, it is about a “team of teams” approach, where we all understand our capabilities and competencies and we all work to our best strengths, rather than any one agency saying, “We can control and command everything,” because no one agency can in this field. Does that answer your question?

- Q58 **Rachel Hopkins:** It leads very nicely to my final point, which is about the emphasis on the role of local resilience forums, for example in communicating public health issues. How would you assess their performance in this crisis?

Jim McManus: My experience is that the very best local resilience fora have focused on doing well what they are set up to do well, which is co-ordination, creating arrangements and working hand in glove with the director of public health in the local area. This is not like an ordinary, normal incident. Command and control, in and of itself, will take us so far, but you actually have a range of other issues; you have a long burn.

What is driving this pandemic is the levels of infection, immunity, recovery and, very sadly, death. You need to take a long-term approach to this, guided by both local capabilities and the key players in the system. My experience is that those local resilience fora that have done that well are really getting on top of this. I am very lucky and very blessed with the colleagues I get to work with locally on that.

Chair: Thank you. We will move on to Paul Holmes.

- Q59 **Paul Holmes:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for coming. I will ask a very broad question at the beginning and then come to a specific issue concerning waste collection. This is probably mostly for Jim, in the public health realm. What other public health concerns need greater Government action and support at this time? I know that is quite a broad question, but is there anything that has not been covered?



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Jim McManus: Thank you for that question. The first is an absolute determination to work as a system; national and local must work hand in glove. Secondly, an absolute determination to get back on a preventive footing. Thirdly, testing. Fourthly, contact tracing. Fifthly, the whole area of navigating our way out of this in a clear, consistent way that continues to give us hope that we will win over this virus, and that there are a range of things to help us do that.

I reiterate the absolutely crucial public health importance of social care. If special care collapses, the burden of ill health and death will be enormous on any given day. If childcare and children's services collapse, it will be the same. This is not about one agency; this is about us, as a system, protecting and promoting the health of our population. We need each other. Forgive me for going on so long.

Q60 **Paul Holmes:** No, you haven't at all. For quite a generic question, you have come through with quite a—

Chair: I think Julie wants to follow Jim before you come back to your specific question, Paul, if that is all right.

Julie Ogley: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Holmes. One of my anxieties is about when we begin to talk about the NHS beginning to pick up some of its usual responsibilities—elective surgery and so on. Building on Jim's point, I want us to be really clear about the importance of social care and to be absolutely certain that we get the support to care homes and to people in their own homes sorted out before we make decisions about focusing elsewhere. I am really anxious that, if we do not get that right, as Jim says, we will end up with another wave of the virus, which will be much more difficult to deal with.

Q61 **Paul Holmes:** Thank you. The Committee has heard about the particular need for the Government to focus on social care. That has been heard, and we will continue to push that message. On the specific question, there have been particular worries about the strain on waste collection due to the crisis. Indeed, if you look at my postbag, there is now overwhelming pressure from district and borough councils on county councils to start opening up their waste disposal and tip sites, for example. It has been explained to me that one problem with that is the ongoing journey of that waste, and whether the supply chain can pick that up. What public health considerations should feed into that debate, particularly around waste collection and disposal?

Jim McManus: I think there are a number. If you will forgive me, I will focus on the safety of staff. My bin collectors do a wonderful job, and my county council does a great job of waste disposal. I am very concerned about the safety of staff. I think the PPE guidance is fine, in terms of what they do. In fact, in a previous pandemic, when I was in a different job, I actually went out on the bins for three days in a row with the local bin collectors to show solidarity, and hurt my back in the process. The issues for waste collection centres will primarily be whether people observe good



social distancing discipline. If they do not, that puts our staff at risk, and we need to be very careful about that.

Other public health issues are the accumulation of waste, which may cause public health hazards. I do not see that as being an issue because I think our waste disposal people—Mr Whiteman may want to come in here—are doing a valiant job of collecting waste that could create significant infection and vermin issues. People might end up with a large pile of cardboard from a lot of the deliveries that they have been having, which may create onward recycling issues. I do not see that as creating quite so much in the way of public health issues. Has that answered your question?

Q62 Paul Holmes: It has, thank you. Do you think the guidance has been appropriate and concise enough from central Government on this?

Jim McManus: I think that most directors of public health would feel that we have had a great deal of guidance. I do not know whether we have reached peak guidance, but we may need to strip back some of the guidance to go back to principles. I have certainly spent a great deal of time interpreting that guidance.

Paul Holmes: I don't envy you.

Q63 Ben Everitt: It is the Jim show, I'm afraid, Jim. My question is on public health again, specifically parks and green spaces. You will have noticed that over the weekend the Communities Secretary was very pleased that 360 parks and green spaces had reopened upon his urging councils to take a more pragmatic view on keeping the parks open.

We heard from earlier witnesses that the problem with parks being closed was actually much smaller than was reported in the media, but when we talk about the potential for a mental health timebomb from the covid experience, keeping our green spaces open has a part to play. Of course, not everybody has a garden. Will you comment specifically on the Government's policy there?

Jim McManus: From a public health perspective, it makes good sense to allow people to have access to green space, because we know that people are helped indirectly with their mental health by being in green space, and directly in terms of its effects on blood pressure and the impact of physical activity on managing your mental health. It is a very strong thing to do.

In my experience, the issue where parks may have been closed has been that people were not observing social distancing and were putting park staff at risk. I agree with you that it has been a very small number. The more that we can keep green space open for use the better. I have seen examples where local councils may have closed car parks but kept the green space itself open as a way of regulating that behaviour. The more that we can keep green space open—the British Psychological Society has called for this—the better for the health of our population.

Q64 Ben Everitt: I happen to agree entirely, Jim. I note that there was a study by a university in Denmark that used satellite data and their citizens registry to track the health outcomes of people who were born



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and raised near green spaces. Anybody within half a kilometre of a green space when they grew up has a 55% less chance of developing psychological problems in their adulthood. There is clear evidence that we are on the right track here.

Turning to cemeteries, obviously there has been a mixed interpretation of the number of people allowed to attend funerals. Do you agree with the current situation, or do you think that there should be stricter or looser guidance?

Jim McManus: I think this is fiendishly challenging, as someone who has worked in grief and bereavement for years; I am a psychologist by background. I did not get to say goodbye to my father when he died some years ago. That took me a long time to get over.

Those rituals of being able to touch and express care for the people that you have loved and lost are hugely important, but we need to prevent the spread of the virus, so this is a balancing act. In my experience, you have to balance protecting the health and wellbeing of the staff attending the cemetery and any ministers of religion and clergy, as well as the mourners. You will never get the balance hugely right. It is compassionate for the Government to say that people who are vulnerable should be facilitated to attend. The burden that will put on staff at crematoria, cemeteries and places of worship will be quite considerable. It is a great measure of our humanity.

Again, it is a case where—having worked with a number of these places directly—giving them the principles and allowing them to interpret them is important. Do not set an absolute number on crematoria, because if you have a crematorium where 100 people can social distance, it is a far cry from a crematorium chapel where two people can social distance. For me, that shows the reliance on local systems and their ability to interpret this public health guidance. Is that clear and helpful?

Q65 **Ben Everitt:** It is so clear that you have practically answered my final question as well, which refers to the point you made earlier about peak guidance, which I think was deftly put. Essentially, looking at the whole and not just cemeteries, crematoria and green spaces—I think I know the answer—do you think the burden is best placed on local authorities to make their decisions or do you think guidance should be more centralised?

Jim McManus: I think it is a real mix. One of the great things Public Health England has done during this—it has not been credited for it—is to produce some extremely clear guidance working with local areas and local experts. That has been the best of the guidance. I think the best situation is for Public Health England to show its scientific mettle and abilities, and work with us locally to interpret that. Where it does that, we have shown that we get a really good result. That is about our national Public Health England colleagues and us working hand in glove.

Q66 **Ben Everitt:** Thank you. Do the other witnesses want to comment on any of those points? I am aware that this section has been focused on Jim.



Rob Whiteman: I would just comment that, obviously, some of the resources that are being spent at the moment will go into a post-crisis world. We will look at the availability of parks and open spaces. I would add that councils have done really good work with golf courses and lots of owners in the wider public realm, in order to open up for their local communities.

The point I would make is that some of the points in the very rich testimony that Mr McManus just gave will carry on into a post-covid world, yet in the pre-covid world we often had to cut back on those things because of resources constraints. It will be interesting to see how we balance that in the medium term. People will have different expectations about what is needed.

Chair: Maybe that is a little bit of optimism for the future. We will move on to our final subject.

Q67 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** This question is also directed at Jim—sorry, Jim. I just want to talk about social distancing at work. I have had a number of cases in which residents have said to me that they are being told to go to work, but they are not practising social distancing. When I have written to their employers, they have put those measures in place. Do you think that there is clear enough guidance to staff, so that they can ensure that they can properly social distance while at work? Do you think employers understand that, too?

Jim McManus: I would say that the HR bodies—the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Public Services People Managers Association—have been clear that employers have a duty to put in place social distancing stemming from the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act. That has not always been as clear as it could be for employees, and some employers have become a bit confused. I am sure we have all been in supermarkets where staff have been a bit too close together, and customers have not respected staff's distance.

It is a continual effort for us to reassure through simple messages. Again, not everybody is a scientist and interested in the nuance of it, so we have to articulate these things in ways that are easy to adhere to. The use of behavioural science in some of our messages could be much better, if I may say so.

Q68 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** Some of it is the messaging, but I wanted to ask you whether sometimes—I do not want to speculate too much on this—there is a possibility that some employees may not be practising it because they feel that no one is watching them. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Jim McManus: I think there are a number of things; that might be one of them. It might also be the idea that, "I'm invincible, because I have a mask or a pair of gloves on"—the hi-vis invincibility, when you are wearing a hi-vis thing on a bicycle and you think an accident will not hit you. That is just human behaviour. Reinforcing that social distance is not about whether somebody is watching you, but something you do to protect



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yourself and others from this infection, and that it has to be second nature now, is something we all need to be reminded of every day. I would agree that we need to be reminded consistently of it.

Abena Oppong-Asare: That is it, unless Julie or Rob want to come in on that.

Julie Ogley: I think we are all going to have to learn to work differently. If we begin to see a gradual release of the lockdown, we really need to think about how we can have colleagues back at work safely. Many councils have been looking to hot-desk and so on, and work agilely, which is working really well through the pandemic, but we are quite social as human beings and part of coming to work is to be at work with your colleagues. As employers, we need to think about how we do that safely. That will require us to think quite differently.

We also need to think about the trade unions. I have had really interesting conversations with national trade union colleagues and local ones, who have particularly talked to me about their concerns about social care. In many aspects of social care, it is actually quite difficult to be socially distanced and to practise some of the guidance that is around. Therefore, how we ensure that their members and our work colleagues are safe in that environment, is also a challenge.

Q69 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** I just want to come back on that, Julie, particularly about the care sector. It is very much reliant on individual care homes putting their own measures in place, is that correct? Obviously, the Government guidelines are there, but are there any tailored ones out there specifically for care homes that they can follow together?

Julie Ogley: I think we are now beginning to think about that nationally. Lots of guidance has been issued about PPE for instance, and now about testing, but actually it is about how we deliver safe care. If you have dementia or an acquired brain injury, you are not necessarily going to understand that you should not be too close to someone. Many other services, such as day care services and respite services, which are really valuable and important, have ceased for the period of the pandemic. We need to really think about what guidance and support we can give to day care providers or respite providers about how to begin to reopen those services in a safe way, both for people who use them and for staff working in them as well.

Chair: I thank all three witnesses. That has been really helpful to the Committee today.

I began by thanking local government as a whole and everyone who works in it. Today, we have heard some wonderful examples of what local government is doing and what the various services within it are doing. Obviously, social care workers have performed heroically for our country and communities in the last few weeks, and we want to join in with our thanks to them, but we have also heard today about the work that



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environmental health and public health officers and housing and homeless workers are doing.

We have heard about waste collection and waste disposal operatives, whom we rely on as really important, and workers in parks and open spaces. Those in cemeteries and crematoria, and, often forgotten, those who work in our mortuaries as well, are having a really awful time at present but they are doing great work. Again, not least, there are the backroom staff in local government who are often regarded as pen-pushers, but who are pen-pushing to effect now by getting grants out to businesses, helping people with reductions in their council tax and other important things as well.

I may have missed one or two important services out—I am sorry if I have—but the general thanks is to everyone in local government who is doing such a tremendous job to help us through this crisis. Thanks very much indeed. Thank you to the three of you for coming today.