

**S↑TRONGER
COUNTRIES
STRONGER
COMMUNITIES↑**

**Business Plan
and Work
Programme**

2026/27



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CCN
THE VOICE OF COUNTIES

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Presented on behalf of the cross-party Executive Committee of the County Councils Network (CCN), the Business Plan & Work Programme 2026/27 sets out the strategic framework through which the Network will deliver for its member councils over the coming year.

The Business Plan provides clarity of purpose, focus and direction – articulating our vision and objectives, defining our campaign narrative, and outlining the policy, communications and public affairs activity that will enable CCN to be an influential and effective voice for county and non-metropolitan unitary authorities.

This year's Plan is being developed at a pivotal moment for both CCN and the wider local government sector.

It is the first Business Plan following the 2025 local elections, which have reshaped the political balance of the Network and brought new administrations and perspectives into CCN's leadership.

It also comes amid a fluid and uncertain national policy landscape, where major reforms across local government finance, social care, SEND, planning, devolution and local government reorganisation will have profound implications for our member councils and the communities they serve.

In this context, the 2026/27 Business Plan refreshes our strategic priorities and campaign narrative to reflect both changing national circumstances and the evolving composition of our membership.

Building on our strong foundations, the Plan reinforces CCN's core mission – to ensure county and unitary authorities have the powers, resources and recognition they require to meet the needs and aspirations of residents – while positioning the Network more confidently than ever as **The Voice of Counties** within the wider local government sector and as a leading national representative body.

Alongside a renewed corporate strategy, the Plan introduces a new overarching campaign narrative – **Stronger Counties, Stronger Communities** – which will frame our advocacy throughout the year.

This narrative recognises the central role county and non-metropolitan unitary councils play in powering England's economy, delivering essential services across large and diverse geographies, and supporting half of the country's population.

It also makes clear that CCN's advocacy is rooted in securing a fair deal for county areas: not special treatment, but equitable policy, funding and reform that properly reflects the scale, complexity and contribution of the places our councils represent.

Above all, this Plan reaffirms CCN's commitment to being a pragmatic, evidence-based and politically astute national representative body – one that works constructively with government and partners on a cross-party basis, while robustly defending the interests of county and non-metropolitan communities.

Through focused advocacy, strengthened member engagement and targeted research, CCN will ensure that our member councils remain central to the national conversation and equipped to deliver stronger outcomes for the communities they serve.

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Business Plan 2026/27

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OUR MEMBERSHIP

CCN is the largest grouping of upper-tier authorities in England, with our councils covering 47% of England's population and 86% of its landmass. We are the dedicated national representative body for our 39 member councils, articulating the priorities and policy issues that matter most to them.

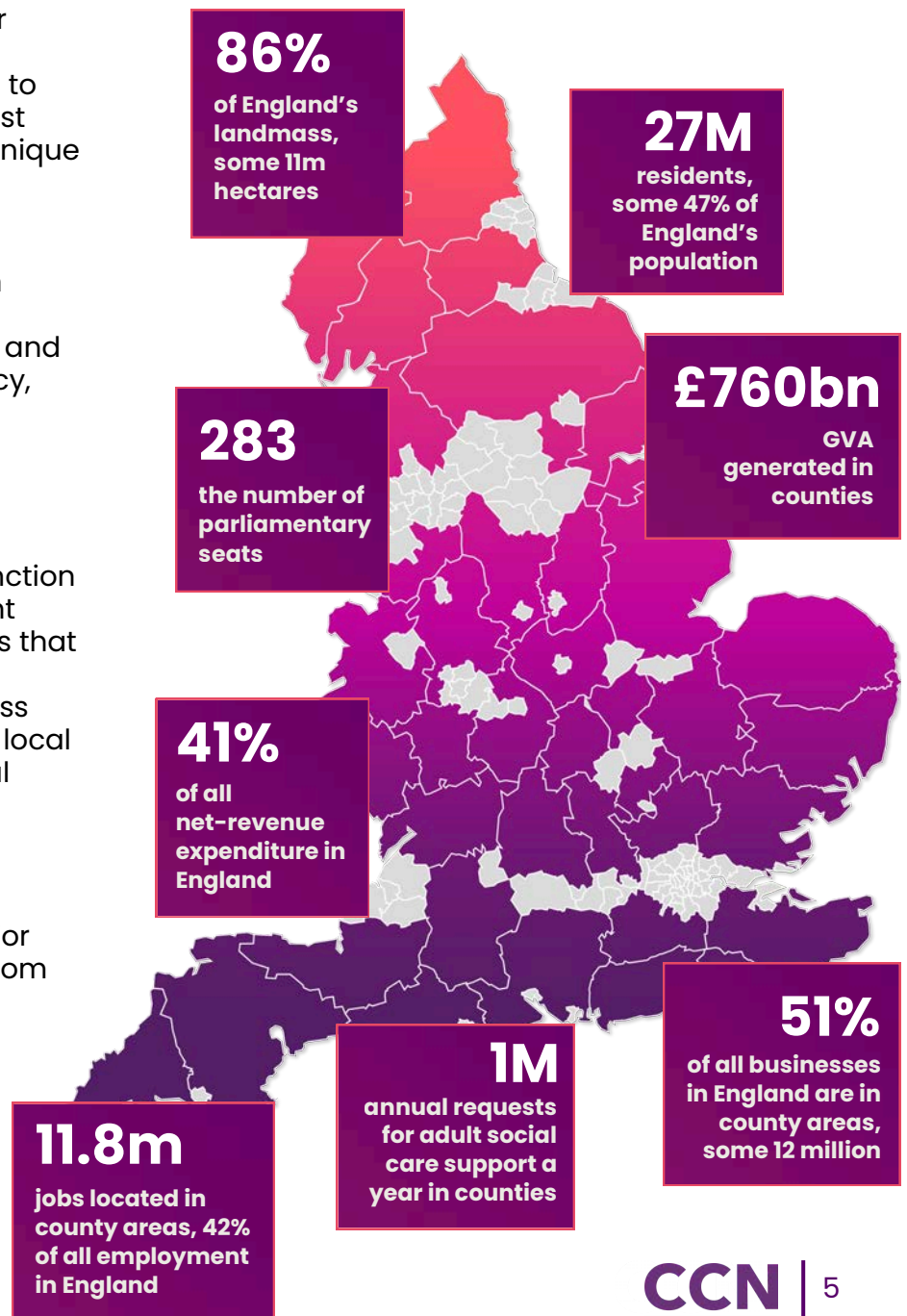
We provide their gateway to Whitehall and Parliament, and speak on their behalf in the national media. We provide a platform for our councils to share common challenges and best practice, while representing their unique interests within the LGA.

As the most prominent body representing upper-tier councils in England, CCN is the only counterbalance to urban-focused and city-centric local government policy, while being a leading national representative body for all of local government.

Most importantly, our network represents more than a type or function of local government – we represent both county and unitary authorities that share common characteristics, challenges and opportunities across unique geographies, regardless of local authority structures, size or political composition.

Counties are distinct and historic places, containing large rural and coastal communities, but also major towns and cities that are distinct from urban metropolitan areas.

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



OUR GOVERNANCE

CCN is a cross-party member-led organisation, with elected councillors at the heart of driving the organisation's advocacy. The network has three layers of governance:

- **Management Committee** is the elected body comprising the CCN Chair and Vice-Chairs from each of the political groups. The group with the largest political representation nominates the Chair.
- The **CCN Executive** is the politically proportionate body which consists of Management Committee members and group-appointed Executive Members. The overall balance of membership of the CCN Executive is politically proportionate in line with the total political balance of CCN authorities, with Group Leaders nominating Spokespersons to lead on policy portfolios.
- **CCN Council** is the third part of our governance structure. A much larger body of around 150 councillors, each member council nominates up to four elected members to serve on the CCN Council. Top-up places are used to ensure political proportionality.

Six county councils have had local elections this May. Alongside this, CCN will need to incorporate North Lincolnshire Council and Leicestershire County Council as newly, and re-joined, members into our political balance. This means CCN's political balance will be updated during May using the Rallings and Thrasher model.

Following this process, the leadership of CCN will be reconstituted again later this year. New members of CCN Executive and CCN Council will be appointed leading up to the CCN Annual General Meeting in September 2026.

The current members of CCN Executive can be found [here](#).

Management Committee

The formal role of Management Committee is to propose the Annual Budget at the Council meeting in March, alongside the audited accounts for approval by Council at the AGM in September. However, given the cross-party nature of the network, it also provides an important forum which brings together the leaders of each political group.

Executive Committee

The primary function of Executive is to propose the Business Plan and Work Programme at the Council meeting in March, alongside supporting the wider leadership, decision making, policy development and advocacy of the network. All members of CCN Executive, as the politically proportionate leadership body, have an important role in fulfilling these functions.

CCN Council

CCN Council meets four times a year to approve the annual budget, business plan and audited accounts. Members of CCN Council have the opportunity to attend meetings and engage with high-profile speakers, including government ministers.


OUR TEAM


CCN has nine members of its officer team based in 18 Smith Square, Westminster and remotely. Details of individuals and their roles are listed below.



Simon Edwards

Chief Executive

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Simon is the Chief Executive of CCN, responsible for leadership of the organisation, business management and all aspects of CCN's membership.



James Maker

Director of Policy & Communications

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James is responsible for the delivery of CCN's full portfolio of policy and research, including finance and local government reorganisation. He also oversees CCN's communications and media relations.



Ian Burbidge

Senior Media & Communications Officer

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Ian is responsible for CCN's communications, marketing, and public affairs support. In his role, Ian leads both external and internal communications.



Hannah Chard

Events & Partnerships Officer



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Hannah is responsible for managing CCN's Strategic Partners and Conference partners. She also leads on the planning and organisation of CCN's events, including CCN Conference.





Peter French
Senior Policy Advisor

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Peter leads on the CCN’s place-based policy and research. His remit includes leading work on housing, planning, climate change, transport and infrastructure.





Jonathan Rallings
Senior Policy Advisor

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Jon leads the CCN’s work on children’s areas of the network’s policy and research, overseeing our work across children’s social care, education and SEND.





James Holden
Senior Corporate & Public Affairs Officers

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 07841699963

James leads on CCN’s public affairs engagement work, including liaison with parliamentarians, special advisors, and senior officials on behalf of the CCN membership, while co-ordinating CCN’s engagement and meetings with its membership.





Chloe Reeves
Senior Policy Advisor

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Chloe leads on CCN’s work on adult social care and health, including health integration and the Independent Commission on Social Care.



Alun Hughes
Senior Policy Advisor

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Alun leads the CCN’s policy and research on economic growth, devolution and supports CCN work on local government reorganisation.

Following an internal review of CCN's Corporate Vision, Aim and Objectives, the Business Plan and Work Programme 2026/27 continues to reinforce our current mission statement of the Network.

This provides a clear vision and aim that articulates the purpose of the Network and provides a set of objectives to underpin the Business Plan and Work Programme.

Vision

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

Aim

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

Objectives

| | |
|---|---|
| Influence public policy at national level | Act as the voice for county and unitary councils, advocating and representing members' views across Whitehall, within the LGA, and to key influencers. |
| Produce research & innovative policy solutions | Produce or commission original research to support the development and advocacy of innovative policy solutions, addressing the unique demographic, financial and geographical challenges facing counties. |
| Enhance the profile of CCN | Continue to raise the profile of CCN, lead members and officers through development of strong, impactful and consistent external and internal communications alongside a targeted public affairs strategy. |
| Support member councils & share best practice | Act as a gateway to Whitehall for member councils. Share intelligence and best practice to support councils and public sector partners to continue to be the most effective and efficient organisations in the public sector. |
| Corporate resilience | Identify strategic risks and set out organisational and financial strategies to ensure the network is resilient and sustainable over the short, medium and long term. |

CORPORATE STRATEGY

In setting out our corporate strategy for the coming year to deliver against these objectives, this Business Plan recognises the development of a more plural political landscape and the evolving composition of our membership in order to future proof the organisation as a leading national representative body and special interest group.

Over the past 12 months, the network has witnessed a reshaping of our political balance with new administrations and perspectives brought into CCN's leadership.

In light of this, CCN has reviewed its' governance arrangements. This has strengthened the network's ways of working and modernised its' constitution arrangements, enhancing the role of Management Committee and the politically proportionate Executive Committee in setting the strategic direction of the organisation.

These stronger arrangements have been put in place to ensure that CCN's cross-party approach is maintained through political change, while putting in place mechanisms to allow the expression of differing views on specific policy areas.

Equally, CCN recognise the implications of local government reorganisation (LGR) on the membership of the network, with a government ambition to abolish all two-tier areas by the end of this parliament. This will mean successor unitary authorities to county councils that share the common characteristics of our existing member councils will be eligible to join the network, starting with East and West Surrey in April 2027 and then remaining new councils from April 2028.

Given these timescales, our immediate overriding priority remains representing our existing county and unitary members in the present moment and expanding our policy development to better reflect the wider range of services delivered by unitary councils, while supporting those councils who are preparing for reorganisation.

Delivering for your local area

From our engagement with member councils, we have a unique understanding of the challenges facing your areas. Our concerted campaigning has helped deliver hundreds of millions in extra funding for its members. **In the last year alone our advocacy helped secure billions in financial support for our councils through SEND deficit write-offs.**

Helped shape government policy

Through our research and evidence, CCN has led the policy agenda on a host of issues for county and unitary councils. **Over the last year alone we delivered 16 research reports and consultation responses, helping to deliver major reforms to the SEND system while defending the interests of our members on planning reform, devolution and funding reform.**

Made your voice heard on the national stage

As a national advocacy body, CCN has a strong media and public affairs profile that makes our members voice heard in Whitehall and across the country. **In the last year alone we have met with 40 MPs, various Ministers and Senior Civil Servants across multiple departments, while delivering over 4,500 media hits, including 960 national media stories.**

However, we will also lay the foundations for engaging new unitary councils and continue to position our network as the body to represent all non-metropolitan councils regardless of local authority structures, size and political composition.

While reorganisation will change the number and size of councils, these new local authorities will serve and represent unique places; large rural and coastal communities, but also major towns and cities that are distinct from urban metropolitan areas.

As such, there will always be a need for a national special interest group that represents councils in county areas; bringing together non-metropolitan local authorities with common and shared characteristics to powerfully advocate on their behalf and influence government policy.

Our network is the only dedicated special interest group for non-metropolitan councils that has a distinct and established national profile, underpinned by an organisational infrastructure and policy expertise to influence policy on the major agendas facing upper-tier councils, including adult social care, children's services, special educational needs, housing, economic growth, and devolution.

Stretching back to the reorganisation of the late 1990s, that is why CCN have become the home for unitary councils that share common characteristics and which are located within historic non-metropolitan county areas. Almost half of our members are already unitary councils, and every non-urban unitary council created over the last three decades have joined CCN.

These councils have all played a vital role in helping the CCN become a leading national representative body for all of local government, and the only significant counterbalance to the bodies representing urban metropolitan areas.

Building on North Lincolnshire Council becoming CCN's 18th unitary council member, the network remain open to requests to join the network from other existing non-metropolitan unitary local authorities that share the common characteristics of our existing member councils. As with previous reorganisations, following elections to shadow authorities in May 2026, CCN will also seek to engage East and West Surrey Councils ahead of becoming eligible for full membership in 2027.

As we look ahead, CCN is determined to do more than ever to support all our members, both now and in the future, as the sector adapts and changes.



MEMBER SUPPORT

Over the coming year, CCN will continue to combine advocacy, research, communications and member engagement to ensure county and non-metropolitan unitary councils have the influence, evidence and support they need to shape government reforms and deliver effectively for their communities.

National Policy Advocacy

CCN will act as the collective voice of its members in Whitehall, Parliament and across the wider local government sector. We will deliver:

- Representation of members' interests on major reforms including local government finance, social care, SEND, planning, devolution and transport.
- Responses to consultations and legislation.
- Engagement with ministers, senior civil servants and MPs.
- On-the-day responses and sustained campaigning to influence national decisions.

Media and Profile Raising

CCN will ensure county areas are visible and influential in national debates, enhancing the profile of members nationally by:

- Securing national media coverage for major reports and campaigns.
- Providing consistent messaging in response to policy announcements and fiscal events.
- Producing branded materials and video content to amplify members' voices.

Research and Evidence

CCN will commission and produce original, high-profile and impactful research to strengthen its advocacy and support councils locally. This will include:

- Independent reports and consultancy projects.
- Internal data modelling and financial analysis.
- Collaborative projects with member councils.

This evidence base will shape national debates while equipping councils with robust analysis to support local decision-making.

Member Support and Intelligence Sharing

CCN will provide practical support to member councils through:

- Dedicated senior officer groups and spokesperson networks.
- Policy briefings and technical updates.
- Regular meetings with leaders, chief executives and cabinet members.
- Sharing intelligence from Whitehall and across the sector and facilitating best practice exchange between councils.
- Supporting councils individually by advising on key reform programmes.
- Hosting events and webinars, alongside the nationally significant CCN Annual Conference.

STRONGER COUNTIES STRONGER COMMUNITIES

For 2026/27, CCN will adopt a new campaign narrative *Stronger Counties, Stronger Communities*, underpinned by our revised set of strategic priorities and associated work-streams.

This campaign narrative will seek to articulate that county and non-metropolitan unitary councils sit at the heart of England's largest places. They serve counties that are home to half of England's population, power the national economy, grow our food, protect our environment, and connect cities, towns, and rural communities.

From social care and education to transport, public health, and climate resilience, county and unitary councils deliver the essential services that keep the country running.

But the role of our member councils and the places they represent has never been more critical – or more constrained. Increasingly government policy does not recognise the unique challenges that our communities face, nor the opportunities that could be unleashed.

The pressures facing our communities are rising within a challenging financial environment. Populations are growing older and changing, demand for care is mounting, pressures on children's services are intensifying, and the cost of maintaining vast infrastructure networks continues to increase.

At the same time, county and non-metropolitan unitary councils are working collaboratively with government and local partners in leading the response to national priorities: reforming public services, driving economic growth, enabling housing, and strengthening community resilience.

Through our advocacy, CCN will not be asking for special treatment for our member councils. What we are asking is for a fair deal for our areas to ensure that we are equally treated alongside more urban parts of local government.

To enable this, national government must deliver reforms that reflect the unique places our councils represent and serve – ones that recognise the scale, complexity, and value of county areas, and gives local leaders the tools to deliver. By doing so, and working in partnership with national government, we can make Stronger Counties and deliver Stronger Communities.

Supporting themes of our core campaign narrative of *Stronger Counties, Stronger Communities* is set out below.

We are the backbone of local government in England

Our councils cover the majority of the country's landmass, infrastructure, and strategic transport networks. Our councils need to plan for the long term, work across large and diverse geographies, and deliver services that require scale, stability, and local insight

We are pragmatic, efficient, and delivery-focused

Our councils innovate because they must. They collaborate with national government, neighbouring councils, the NHS, businesses, and the voluntary sector to make every pound work harder. They prevent problems upstream, invest early, and focus relentlessly on outcomes.

We are closest to the realities facing communities

From market towns to villages, coastal areas to growth corridors, our councils understand what different places need — **and why one-size-fits-all policy does not work.**

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

For the past two Business Plans, CCN's policy priorities were articulated through its Manifesto for Counties.

While there are many aspects of the strategic framework within the Manifesto for Counties that should be retained, it is crucial the network refreshes our priorities for the forthcoming period given the time that has elapsed since the general election, and developments in the wider national policy landscape.

Importantly, this Business Plan and Work Programme represents our first since the 2025 local elections, which witnessed a change in the political control of CCN member councils and political proportionality of the network.

Building on engagement to date with new administrations, the CCN's cross-party Executive and political groups, CCN has reviewed our priorities and work-streams, taking into consideration the views of new administrations and political groups within CCN while ensuring a strong, cross-party approach is maintained.

In developing our strategic priorities for 2026/27, CCN has closely examined the national policy landscape and the unrelenting pace of developments as the government seeks to undertake a range of reforms that will have significant implications for CCN member councils. Officers have also considered the need to better reflect the range of lower-tier services delivered by unitary councils, expanding our strategic priorities from five to six and including a new strategic priority of Communities, Waste & Environment.

Our priorities and associated work programme continues to be underpinned by five key principles that guide the advocacy and work of the CCN Officer team, outlined in the panel to the right.

The table below provides an overview of CCN's strategic policy framework.

CCN's approach to policy development, public affairs and communications is underpinned by a five key principles that guide the team's work:

Selective

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

Pragmatic

Measured campaigning, strongly defending and raising concerns of members while maintaining good relationships and access to Ministers.

Evidence-based

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

Politically Driven

Recognising the political dynamics of our membership and Whitehall, while maintaining a cross-party approach in a more plural and complex political landscape.

Adaptative

Proactively responding to developments to continuously adapt our work programme in response to national developments.

STRATEGIC POLICY FRAMEWORK

| Strategic Priority | Objective | Workstreams |
|---|---|--|
| Local Government Finance | Ensuring our members are financially secure through sustainable funding, service reform and efficiency. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Funding • Efficiency & Improvement • Reorganisation |
| Adult Social Care & Health | Securing practicable reform through the Casey Commission, a sustainable workforce, and preventative neighbourhood and public health services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult Social Care • Workforce • Neighbourhood & Public Health |
| Children’s Services & Education | Achieving a brighter future for young people through preventative children’s services, resetting the SEND system and reforming home to school transport. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children’s Social Care • Special Educational Needs & Disabilities • Education & Home to School Transport |
| Housing, Planning & Infrastructure | Creating thriving communities through a locally led planning system, preventing homelessness and investing in infrastructure and local roads. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local & Strategic Planning • Infrastructure • Housing & Homelessness |
| Devolution, Growth & Transport | Growing county economies through fair investment, greater devolution and sustainable transport. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Growth • Devolution • Transport & Roads |
| Communities, Waste & Environment | Supporting our communities and protecting our environment through delivering essential everyday services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste Services • Environment • Leisure and Recreation |

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

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

CCN will dedicate the majority of its resources towards detailed policy development through responding to government-led consultations and forthcoming legislation.

This will build directly on extensive engagement between CCN senior policy leads and Whitehall departments that happens on a daily basis. CCN must also continue to expand our support to member councils to enable them to engage directly with government through dedicated senior officer groups on key reform programmes, while also facilitating and commissioning research to understand the implications of the proposals on local areas.

As with last year's Business Plan and Work Programme, it is critical that the support provided to member councils on local government reorganisation does not distract from our core policy work and commissioning on critical agendas such as local government finance, SEND, planning reform and social care.

Moreover, recognising the recent and future expansion of CCN's unitary membership, the network will increase its dedicated policy work in relation to lower tier/unitary services. Alongside this, CCN will seek to increase our internal analytical capacity and expertise to increase our outputs on data and financial analysis to support councils and our advocacy.

To deliver this, the CCN Chief Executive has made provisions within the annual Budget to invest resources towards additional staffing capacity to be funded through in-year savings and increased income. CCN is currently undertaking an internal review of staffing requirements across policy and communications ahead of deploying these resources.

Importantly, CCN will continue to support our research and policy advocacy with carefully targeted commissioning to bring in external expertise to support detailed analysis and policy recommendations.

CCN's approach to deploying its commissioning budget will be informed by recent experience on the impact of our commissioned activity.

New projects must be of sufficient size and scope to provide robust evidence and original insight to generate sector interest, to influence the emerging agenda and support member councils locally. This includes working with organisations that have specific expertise, similar objectives to those of CCN and sector or national profile.

Below, we set out the range of policy outputs and publications the network will continue to publish throughout the year. Section 2 sets out our detailed work programme and associated policy development actions and activity.

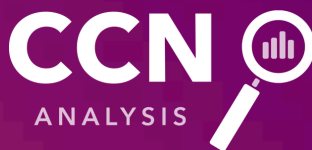
CCN Policy Development

Summary of CCN outputs

COMMISSIONED RESEARCH



CCN commissions a range of external research, resulting in several major independent reports each year. CCN works with the most established consultancy and research organisations in the sector, including strategic partners such as Newton, Grant Thornton, IMPOWER and PwC. CCN also works with smaller agencies for bespoke analysis such as Pixel and Isos Partnership.



CCN Analysis publications are internally produced research reports published throughout the year. They seek to provide the latest data analysis on a variety of topics both within county areas and across England. They explain what these latest trends mean for national and local policy making, and the implications for public services, businesses and communities across our member council areas.



CCN
POLICY IN FOCUS

Authored by the CCN policy team, and built on engagement with experts in CCN member councils and wider stakeholders, alongside drawing on insights from the network's programme of policy development and research reports, *Policy in Focus* seeks to provide new insights on established and developing areas of local government policy. They provide commentary rather than being data-driven reports.



This regular publication seeks to shine the spotlight on best practice and innovation from our member councils across a range of different policy areas. The *County Spotlight* is published frequently and each one focuses on a specific theme.

MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS

In 2025, the CCN had its best-ever year for generating media stories. Through its use of original research, hard-hitting media stories and its contacts in the media, the CCN is increasingly seen as one of the main voices for local government on a host of issues.

The CCN has secured prominent coverage throughout 2025 on the Fair Funding Review, SEND challenges, reorganisation, and councils' funding challenges – highlighting it's members concerns in the media and driving people towards its research and website.

Looking ahead, the CCN wants to consolidate and build on this progress. This includes expanding its focus to different outlets that cover local government issues such as Times Radio, GB News and The New Statesman and by continuing to write topical and relevant press releases.

The media team will look to embed the *Voice of Counties* and *Stronger Counties, Stronger Communities* campaign slogans into media and advocacy wherever possible, building on a variety of videos, opinion pieces and materials such as the 'councillor guide' which have been published in the last year. The aim of this is to illustrate that the CCN is the premier voice for county and unitary councils.

A key part of this will be updating the CCN website with this fresh branding. Aiming for a completion by the second half of 2026, the new website will look to improve functionality for users, make it easier to download and search for specific pieces of research and news, and contain more information on the network and its members.

The media team will also look to expand its remit on social media: making greater use of videos from CCN's spokespeople, greater use of Facebook, publishing more articles from the network and its partners on LinkedIn and looking to start an Instagram account for more short-form content and to publicise research.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- During 2025, CCN published 26 press releases and 26 reactive quotes. This helped secure 4,520 pieces of media coverage – its best-ever year and a 16% increase on 2024. Of this, 961 pieces of coverage were in the national media, a 44% increase on 2024.
- The CCN secured over 100 pieces of coverage for its November 2025 report on the SEND system, helping to achieve two advocacy successes as government pledged to write off 90% of councils' deficits and set out a series of reforms that the network had called for. Coverage included BBC News at One, Radio 4's Today programme, The Times, The Guardian, and Sky News.
- The network's October warnings that reorganisation 'could make or break' care services was covered by over 130 different media outlets, including The Times, The Telegraph, The Daily Mail, and The Express.
- Since the Fair Funding Review was published, CCN's concerns have featured prominently in the media. This includes several pieces of coverage in The Times, The Financial Times, the Daily Mail, and The Telegraph. Most recently, the network's finance spokesperson has featured on Times Radio and GB News.
- In January, the CCN's warnings over the financial pressures facing county and unitary councils received over 150 pieces of coverage, including ITV Evening News, The Independent, GB News, and The Times.
- The CCN's website had 69,000 new users visit in 2025 – a 15% increase on 2024.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND EVENTS

CCN's Public Affairs Strategy for the coming year will build on the engagement of officers and spokespeople with ministers, MPs and peers over the past year, advocating on behalf of members on the biggest issues that they face, and focussing in particular on the policy priorities set out in this Business Plan.

CCN will look to continue to engage MPs and Peers through meetings, written briefings and its regular Parliamentary Newsletter to ensure that the position of CCN and its members continues to be well-understood at Westminster.

Officers will also continue to facilitate engagement for the wider network with ministers and officials, securing speakers on key issues for Council meetings, monthly Leaders' Calls, and officer networks.

A new King's Speech, setting out the government's legislative priorities for the first time since the general election, is expected in the late spring. CCN will work to understand the impact of any relevant legislation on members and ensure that concerns are taken up, both with government and parliamentarians as legislation is taken forward.

Over the year CCN will look to expand the number of online events for members and stakeholders to continue to raise the profile of the network and its research and advocacy.

CCN will also hold its regular in-person events: its Annual Drinks Reception at the LGA Conference will be on Tuesday 7th July; and the network's own Annual Conference at the Crowne Plaza in Marlow, to be held this year between Sunday 15th and Tuesday 17th November. CCN officers will again work to secure the high-profile and relevant speakers that members find it helpful to hear from, alongside the opportunities for networking at this intimate event.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- CCN briefed parliamentarians on key developments, with its research used in a number of debates, including on local government finance, regional transport, and SEND provision.
- CCN's research was also used as MPs and Peers debated the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill and the Planning and Infrastructure Act, with spokespeople giving evidence to both Bill Committees.
- Over the year officers met over 40 Members of Parliament to ensure they were up to date on the key issues facing county and unitary councils.
- In July CCN had its regular stand at the LGA Conference in Liverpool, holding a well-attended reception at the Museum of Liverpool, and a fringe event on the introduction of strategic planning.
- The 2025 Annual Conference Marlow saw the highest number of delegates since the pandemic, and included plenary sessions on finance, SEND, housing delivery, economic growth, and neighbourhood health, and with a closing keynote address from former Health Secretary Alan Milburn.

CCN's Partnership Programme is of great importance to the network. Alongside securing vital external income for CCN, it provides value and insight for members through quality research and helping ensure that our annual events continue to be some of the most high-profile in the local government sector.

Partners can be confident that they are engaging not only with the largest part of local government, but with a network interested in pursuing evidence-based solutions to the challenges faced by the sector.

Over the coming year we will work to maintain our existing partners, whilst looking at opportunities to expand our reach and access to wider expertise by bringing on new partners.

Our model to support this is split into three areas:

- 1 | Conference Partners
- 2 | Bespoke Partnerships
- 3 | Strategic Partnerships

Strategic Partners 2026

CCLA

GOOD INVESTMENT

 Grant Thornton

IMPOWER

 LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Newton 


pwc

Strategic Partnerships

Strategic Partners are organisations that CCN work with throughout the year or on multi-year partnerships. This allows CCN to work with organisations on research relevant to members and CCN's priorities for the year. For example, over the past year we have worked with them on research on fiscal devolution and, the wider devolution programme, local government reorganisation and unlocking council productivity with AI.

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



Through our partnership with CCN, we have been able to collaborate on impactful research and innovative solutions that address the critical challenges facing local government, particularly in areas such as social care and children's services. Together, we are driving meaningful change to improve outcomes for communities across England.

Jeremy Cooper, Executive Director, IMPOWER

Bespoke & Conference Partners

Bespoke Partners are organisations who wish to work with CCN on individual projects, for example a Dialogues Report alongside a launch webinar. As part of this programme, we are currently finalising work with Basis on Free School Meals, launching in April 2026.

Conference Partners are those who attend our annual Conference, either as an exhibitor or to host a roundtable or workshop. In 2025 we welcomed three new Conference Partners alongside five returning Conference Partners who hosted stands and sessions alongside our Strategic Partners. Sessions led by our Conference Partners last year covered topics such as home to school transport, strategic planning, and cyber security.



The County Council Network's Annual Conference is one of our favourite events of the year and has become a fixture in our calendar. Its focus is its particular strength. The excellent agenda brings a good range of attendees, and the event's structure means they have time and space to engage with exhibitors.

Liz Davidson, Chief Marketing Officer, QRoutes.

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Local Government Finance

Ensuring our members are financially secure through sustainable funding, service reform and efficiency.

1 Council Funding

CCN will remain a leading voice on council funding, advocating on both the unique financial challenges facing our member councils and those of the wider sector.

The past twelve months have been the most important in over a decade for council finances. Not only has the government completed the Fair Funding Review (FFR) 2.0, introducing updated allocations across a three-year settlement, they have finally set out their approach to managing high-needs deficits.

While 20 CCN member councils will see funding increased, 19 will see reductions over the next three years. Our most recent analysis has shown that, collectively, CCN member councils face a funding gap of over £2.5bn next year. Therefore, there will be no let up in the financial challenges and the need for CCN to support our member councils articulate these pressures.

Through public-facing advocacy and research, CCN must continue to demonstrate the scale and uniqueness of the funding challenge facing our member councils, beyond the government's narrow focus on deprivation.

This will necessitate the delivery of robust analysis and engagement with senior officials, working closely with Society of County Treasurers (SCT) throughout the year. This will include further research to demonstrate the additional pressures faced by rural councils in delivering services beyond adult social care to influence future settlements.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- In June, our analysis with the SCT showed that our member councils needed to deliver £1.2bn in savings to balance their budgets last year.
- CCN's enhanced retainer with Pixel provided detailed modelling on the impact of the Fair Funding Review to enable our member councils to understand the impact on their councils and plan their budgets.
- Our consultation responses and engagement with FFR 2.0 ensured the government proposals were better than many feared, with the government adopting key CCN asks, including a new adult social care and home to school transport formulas.
- CCN has also powerfully advocated on the impact of the government back-tracking on funding commitments to rural areas by downgrading remoteness in the funding formula.
- Most recently our new analysis with PwC and Pixel showed the scale of the funding challenge facing our member councils, with an £11bn cumulative funding gap over the next three years.
- At the final local government settlement, CCN secured a correction to business rates pooling gains worth £92m over three years for county councils.
- Most importantly, our persistent advocacy over a number of years led to a commitment to wipe 90% of historic SEND deficits, securing up to £3bn worth of financial support for our member councils.

Equally, the approach to managing SEND deficits will be key to the financial health of our member councils. It remains critical that the network works closely with the government as it details arrangements for deficit grants. CCN must ensure a fair outcome and will support member councils as they develop SEND Reform Plans – a condition of deficit write-offs. The government have also committed to reforming the formula for high-needs funding. CCN will engage extensively in this review, producing new research and evidence to demonstrate the scale of underfunding for county and rural areas.

2 Efficiency & Improvement

CCN will have an unrelenting focus on supporting our member councils to drive service efficiency, deliver continuous service improvement and public service reform at scale.

The outcome the FFR will now begin to have real world impacts on our member councils as they set out to deliver against their budget, savings and transformation plans for the year ahead. With CCN councils continuing to operate in an extremely constrained fiscal environment, this will necessitate an unrelenting focus on driving efficiency and value for money to balance budgets, safeguard frontline services and invest in local residents priorities.

More money alone will not close the funding gap facing our member councils, and therefore engaging in the on-going MHCLG review of local authorities statutory responsibilities will be essential to managing future spending needs. Moreover, CCN will seek to influence government proposals on wider public service reform, including test and learn pilots taking place across the country, while working with our strategic partners and member councils to share best practice on transformation and cost reductions.

Underpinning this will be the new Local Outcomes Framework, measuring performance of local areas against 16 priority outcome metrics. CCN will continue to monitor and engage with the implications of the framework, ensuring the contextual challenges of county and rural areas are recognised and a proportionate approach to the presentation of data.

3 Local Government Reorganisation

CCN will continue to advocate for our councils on LGR, making the case for evidence-based decisions, alongside supporting transition and implementation.

Over the past 12 months, CCN has supported its member councils to develop evidence-based, credible proposals for local government reorganisation (LGR). Following the submission of final proposals last year, the government has outlined that it still intends to make decisions on which proposals to implement in all 21 areas by the summer recess.

CCN has, and will continue to engage, extensively with MHCLG and wider government departments to ensure decisions on LGR are evidence-based and in line with the government's statutory criteria. This will be critical to the future financial sustainability of local government in county areas, and CCN will closely scrutinise the decisions and support its member councils in responding to the implications locally.

Moving forward, CCN will continue its active programme of support for member councils focusing on transition and implementation, drawing on the experience of our existing unitary councils, Surrey and Devolution Priority Programme areas, alongside our strategic partners where appropriate.

Budget Pressures Analysis & Advocacy

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

Rural Service Delivery Costs

Following the outcome of the Fair Funding Review, CCN must continue to demonstrate the scale and uniqueness of the funding challenge facing our member councils. The network will seek to commission further research to demonstrate the additional pressures faced by rural councils in delivering services beyond adult social care to influence future settlements.

High-Needs Deficits

The network will work closely with the government as it details arrangements for high-needs deficit grants to ensure a fair outcome which fully funds 90% of deficits to March 2026, and puts in place sustainable plans for future years. CCN will also support member councils as they develop SEND Reform Plans - a condition of deficit write-off plans.

High-Needs Funding Formula Review

Working closely with the SCT, CCN will engage extensively with government plans to reform the high-needs funding formula, producing new research and evidence to demonstrate the scale of underfunding for county and rural areas which has contributed towards disproportionately large SEND deficits.

Review of Statutory Duties

Within the financial context facing CCN councils, we will engage with member councils and MHCLG on the review of local government statutory responsibilities to set out which requirements placed on the sector to deliver duties could be simplified or improved to help reduce cost and improve outcomes for local residents.

Public Service Reform

CCN will seek to influence government proposals on wider public service reform, including test and learn pilots taking place across the country, while working with our strategic partners and member councils to share best practice on transformation and cost reductions.

Local Outcomes Framework

CCN will continue to monitor and engage with the implications of the framework, ensuring the contextual challenges of county and rural areas are recognised and a proportionate approach to the presentation of data.

Local Government Reorganisation

CCN will continue to engage MHCLG and wider government departments on their programme of reorganisation, including supporting the government to make evidence-based decisions and representing members views on the timescales for implementation. CCN will also enhance its programme of support, with an increasing focus on transition and implementation plans.

Adult Social Care & Health

Securing practicable adult social care reform through the Casey Commission, a sustainable workforce, and preventative neighbourhood and public health services.

1 Adult Social Care

Utilising our unique evidence and insight, CCN will continue to support the Casey Commission to recognise and respond to the challenges and opportunities for county areas.

The coming year will be critical for adult social care reform. The Independent Commission on Adult Social Care, chaired by Baroness Casey, will begin to set out what has been heard to date on the problems and possible solutions – engaging further with local government as it works towards publication of the Commission’s interim report later this year and phase one recommendations.

CCN will continue to support Baroness Casey and represent its members’ views in this phase, focused on the development of a national care service and prevention. CCN will seek to ensure adult social care reforms are fair and affordable to councils, with local government remaining at the heart of delivery, while helping to address gaps in data and knowledge. To achieve this, the network will formally submit our unique evidence, insight and institutional knowledge to influence the Commission’s evidence-base and recommendations.

A key part of this work will be our second phase research report on care for working age and lifelong disabled adults. This project will highlight the importance of promoting independence and prevention across the life-course. Alongside this, older people’s care should also aim at promoting independence. CCN will continue to advocate a renewed focus on home-based reablement services that support people to regain function, skills and confidence.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- CCN has been active in shaping national policy discussions on reform. We supported the creation of an Independent Commission on Adult Social Care and have met with Baroness Casey to discuss the reality of delivering adult social care in county areas and the opportunities to make progress on a reformed system.
- CCN’s consultation response on Fair Pay Agreements advocated for councils to have a full and formal role in negotiations. Our submission included financial modelling on the direct and indirect costs of fair pay agreements, and highlighted the risk of excluding councils from decisions affecting provider costs, workforce supply, and market shaping responsibilities.
- The network strongly advocated for councils to be embedded in neighbourhood health, highlighting the importance of council responsibilities in public health, social care and wider prevention.
- Adult social care was central to CCN advocacy on the Fair Funding Review. The network’s concerted advocacy secured an updated Adult Social Care Formula that better recognised the needs of county areas.
- The October report with Newton, *LGR: Analysing the impact on people services* outlined in comprehensive detail the implications of reorganisation for adult care services, supporting member councils to develop evidence-based proposals.

Crucially, the Better Care Fund underpins much of councils' community-based preventative work. CCN will collaborate with government to ensure their planned reforms of the fund prioritise services and funding for councils – including reablement – that promote independence and support people, including unpaid carers, to remain safe, well and independent at home.

2 Workforce

CCN will continue advocating for fully funded Fair Pay Agreements and an equal and active role for councils on the Negotiating Body.

Adult social care faces persistent workforce challenges, including vacancy rates significantly higher than the wider economy, high turnover, low pay, and limited career progression. These factors continue to hinder recruitment and retention. In response, the government will continue to develop Fair Pay Agreements (FPAs), which will set legally binding minimum pay and other terms and conditions for adult social care workers.

CCN supports the ambition to deliver FPAs, but maintains they must be practicable, sustainable and reasonable. Currently, the proposed process does not give sufficient representation to councils nor does the impact assessment recognise the specific needs of CCN areas, despite these being responsible for 50% of projected costs.

CCN will continue to advocate for local government to be fully embedded in the FPA process, with an equal and active role on the Negotiating Body. We will also continue to monitor the 'cost envelope' and the Negotiating Body's handling of this. Any FPA must be fully funded to achieve the aims of the policy.

3 Neighbourhood & Public Health

CCN will advocate that focus and investment must strengthen councils' established place-based leadership and prevention roles, with fair resourcing for county areas.

Neighbourhood health marks a renewed focus on prevention, coordination, personalisation, and place-based, community-led approaches to care. While the policy focus on neighbourhood health stems from the NHS 10 Year Health Plan, it largely reinforces the ethos, responsibilities and activities of CCN members.

Councils have long led the place-shaping agenda and CCN will do more this year to highlight their critical role, producing a new best practice County Spotlight which demonstrates how our councils are the infrastructure bodies that integrate services, convene third sector organisations and community groups, while being the natural home of public health and its workforce's expertise in population health.

Nationally, much of the neighbourhood health programme's focus is on 'neighbourhood health centres'. These centres are intended to address social needs alongside clinical care. Although 250 centres have been announced, experience from previous estate-based initiatives suggests caution about reach to our members. CCN will advocate a fair distribution of government focus and funding of these centres to county areas.

Neighbourhood health offers opportunities to shift funding and focus towards prevention, including through neighbourhood health plans and the Better Care Fund. CCN will continue to advocate that councils' longstanding expertise, partnerships and existing activities are fully utilised and strengthened, rather than duplicated or inadvertently undermined.

Independent Commission on Adult Social Care

Continue to support Baroness Casey as she works towards publication of the Commission's interim report. The network will formally submit our unique evidence and insights to influence the Commission's evidence-base and recommendations, while helping to address gaps in data and knowledge.

Adult Social Care in CCN Areas

Undertake in-house analysis of relevant statutory datasets, contextualised through a rapid literature review, to produce a 'State of Care in Counties' report on the CCN's unique populations, geographies, care workforce and care markets.

Working Age and Lifelong Disabled Adults

Deliver the phase two research report with our strategic partner Newton that demonstrates what preventative, independence-focused social care looks like and means to people, communities and councils.

Neighbourhood Health Plans & Centres

CCN will closely engage with, and support, our member councils in the development of neighbourhood health plans, while advocating for a fair distribution of government focus and funding for neighbourhood health centres to county areas; on an equal footing with metropolitan areas.

Place-based Health and Integration

Produce a new best practice County Spotlight which demonstrates how our councils continue to drive forward place-based health and integration, showing how they convene third sector organisations and community groups, while being the natural home of public health.

Better Care Fund Reforms

Collaborate with government to ensure the planned reforms of the fund prioritise services and council funding – including reablement services – that promote independence and support people, including unpaid carers, to remain safe, well and independent at home.

Fair Pay Agreements

Continue to advocate for local government to have an equal and active role on the Negotiating Body, while assessing and evidencing the impact of proposals on adult social care in county areas – including ensuring the FPAs are fully funded.

Cross-Sector Partnerships

Cross-sector consensus on the next stages of reform will be key, as will collaboration with partners in the private and third sectors. Where appropriate, CCN will collaborate with sector partners to strategically advocate and amplify shared policy asks.

Children's Services & Education

Achieving a brighter future for young people through preventative children's services, resetting the SEND system and reforming home to school transport.

1 Children's Social Care

CCN will remain a leading voice on the pressures facing children's services, including reforms to high-cost placements, regional care cooperatives and early intervention.

The expected passing of the Children's Wellbeing & Schools Bill into law later this year will lead to the introduction of new measures designed to fix the 'broken' market for children's care placements. CCN will closely monitor the introduction of these reforms, including commissioning research to assess how far the pilot Regional Care Co-operatives are helping to reduce council spending and how this model can best operate within county and rural areas.

With the government's focus on prevention and early intervention, CCN's forthcoming report with Newton and SCT will help define how the present children's social care system can be rebalanced towards earlier intervention, reducing the numbers of children in care and improving outcomes for children.

CCN will use these findings to help scope with its member councils a new piece of research specifically focused on the Government's present initiatives to improve family support – the Families First and Best Start In Life programmes, aimed at identifying early support for children that may be at risk of harm. This research will provide perspectives on these initiatives and identify any issues councils need addressing to ensure the programme is successful within county and rural areas.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- CCN has continued to be sector's leading advocate for reform in the SEND System. Our November 2025 report, *Special Educational Needs in England – How we got to crisis point* comprehensively updated our analysis the challenges facing the system, including rising demand, poorer educational outcomes, and unsustainable costs.
- Our research and advocacy on SEND directly influenced the government proposals contained in the consultation *SEND reform: putting children and young people first*. This includes proposals on inclusion in mainstream schools, 'tiered' levels of support, and changes to rulings of tribunals.
- CCN continued to highlight the challenges of high-cost children's placements. Building on the findings from its report with IMPOWER, 'The Way We Care', CCN gave evidence to the Education Select Committee and the National Audit Office's major reports outlining the need for urgent action to address these issues.
- The October report with Newton, *LGR: Analysing the impact on people services* outlined in comprehensive detail the implications of local government reorganisation for children's services, supporting member councils to develop evidence-based proposals.
- CCN published a *Policy In Focus* report outlining the growing challenges facing councils of children's mental health and the implications for children's services.

Ofsted have also confirmed that they will be conducting a review of Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). CCN will work with its member councils to identify key elements of which will need highlighting, participating in wider consultation and debate over any proposed reforms.

2 Special Educational Needs & Disabilities

CCN will engage extensively in the Schools White Paper, advocating for SEND reforms to deliver better outcomes for children and financial sustainability for member councils.

As a leading voice on the challenges facing SEND, CCN's work in this area will be dictated by the recently launched consultation on SEND reform. There is no doubt that the advocacy of the network over recent years has directly influenced the proposals. CCN has welcomed the direction of travel, including proposals on mainstream schools, 'tiered' levels of support, and changes to Tribunals.

However, how far these proposals and associated funding will address the deep-rooted challenges facing the system will be a key area national debate during the 12 week consultation period and subsequent publication of legislation in the King's Speech.

CCN will scrutinise the proposals and engage member councils as part of setting out a comprehensive response to the consultation. This will be supported by external expertise from Isos Partnership, building on previous sector-leading research.

Alongside this, CCN will further evidence the critical importance of prevention and early intervention in SEND through our aforementioned project with SCT and Newton.

3 Education & Home to School Transport

CCN will continue to advocate for the need for a sustainable home to school transport system, while continuing to engage in reforms to the role of councils in education.

Wider education reform is a major priority for this government, and this will have implications for local authorities which CCN must continue to influence through the consultation on the Schools White Paper. A particular focus here will be engaging members on proposals to move all schools to the trust model, including new trusts established by local authorities.

The Children's Wellbeing & Schools Act also places new duties on local authorities to administer a Home-School Register. CCN intends to monitor the introduction of this initiative and identify what new burdens it may be placing on councils, alongside supporting councils deliver strengthened duties for local authorities and schools to co-operate over admissions and place-planning. Other areas of support will also include a new report on spreading best practice to increase the take-up of free schools meals.

Building on recent research, the network will continue to advocate on the rising costs of home to school transport. With demand for SEND home to school transport the key driver of unsustainable costs, CCN will ensure our response to the consultation on the Schools White Paper specifically focuses on this challenge.

Whilst appropriate funding to deliver this service remains vital, equally important will be the extent to which SEND reforms offer councils more levers to manage demand for this service, while continuing to advocate for wider reforms to mainstream home to school transport guidance.

Special Educational Needs Reform

CCN will advocate for its member councils in responding to the new proposals for SEND reform and subsequent legislation, ensuring better outcomes for children and young people and the local authority role in providing these services is appropriately funded.

Prevention & Early Intervention

Finalise and publish a major research project with Newton and SCT on how prevention and early intervention can improve outcomes and reduce costs for children in care, ensuring the report influences continuing reforms by the government and spreading best practice across the sector.

Regional Care Co-operatives

Commission a new project to look at the present progress made in establishing RCC pilots. The report will consider how effectively these pilots are progressing, whether they are address market imbalances, and what learning can be applied as RCCs are established in CCN member councils.

Families First & Best Start In Life

Commission a piece of work with member councils to evaluate what learning has been gained so far in the rollout of new family support initiatives such as Families First, particularly focusing on what additional support and resources may be needed by councils to ensure that the initiatives are successful.

Home to School Transport

CCN will continue to highlight the spiralling costs of home to school transport and the disproportionate impact this has on its member councils. It will particularly focus on the impact of changes in the Government's SEND reforms proposals in helping to address this issue.

Ofsted review of children's services inspections

CCN will support member authorities in assessing the likely impact of reforms to Ofsted's inspections of local authority children's services, engaging with the consultation where appropriate to support member councils' interests.

Education & Schools White Paper

CCN will engage on the impact of reforms to the role of councils in Children's Wellbeing & Schools Act, including Home School Register and place planning duties, while responding to the consultation on wider changes to the schools system contained with the Schools White Paper.

Free School Meal eligibility

CCN will work with a specialist provider to produce a short report explaining changes to eligibility criteria for free schools meals in the coming year, outlining ways that member councils can increase registration by families to help draw down additional educational support around the child, particularly through additional 'pupil premium' funding.

Housing, Planning & Infrastructure

Creating thriving communities through a locally led planning system, preventing homelessness and investing in infrastructure and local roads.

1 Local & Strategic Planning

CCN will continue to influence planning reform, including shaping the NPPF and influencing emerging secondary legislation to support members as they prepare SDSs.

The pace of planning reform remains rapid and the flagship Planning and Infrastructure Act, which received Royal Assent in December 2025, intends to accelerate housing and infrastructure delivery and speed up planning decisions. With mandatory housing targets reintroduced in December 2024, the government also launched a fully overhauled National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for consultation in December 2025.

The revised NPPF represents a significant departure from the current approach, introducing new nationally applied development management policies. Building on our recent consultation responses, CCN will continue to put the views forward of CCN member councils around the local planning system, calling for local democracy to remain a core element of the planning process.

Importantly, as reforms in the Planning and Infrastructure Act begin to take effect, CCN will represent the views of member councils, outlining concerns about the impacts of the new legislation and will work to actively support councils as authorities begin to work through implementation. CCN will also provide support to county councils as they undertake reorganisation, with briefing sessions on housing and planning services and the implications of merging of local planning authorities.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- CCN has continued to engage proactively with the Government's planning reforms. Our advocacy has continued raise concerns over disproportionate housing targets, alongside the need for stability in the planning system, allowing councils to plan for housing needs, alongside infrastructure to support development.
- CCN has engaged extensively with the reintroduction of strategic planning through Spatial Development Strategies, securing county and unitary authorities as lead bodies in producing plans alongside combined authorities.
- The network produced briefings on the Planning & Infrastructure Act at all stages of its journey through Parliament, highlighting areas of concern and pushing for amendments to the legislation that would benefit CCN councils. Our spokesperson also gave evidence to the HCLG Select Committee.
- Continued best practice sharing across member councils, including publishing a County Spotlight showcasing how unitary and county councils are working to get homes delivered across all tenures; delivering innovative approaches to reduce and tackle homelessness; and taking steps to improve housing standards.
- Most recently, CCN have worked with the LGA and DCN to organise a series of webinars to get in depth feedback on the revised National Planning Policy Framework. The feedback received from this webinar was used to shape CCN's response to the consultation.

As details emerge of secondary legislation that will enable Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs) to come forward, we will provide support to member councils, enabling areas to learn from each other. For many councils there continues to be an issue with recruitment and retention of planners, particularly those with the skills to take forward strategic plans. CCN will continue to make the case for sufficient funding.

2 Infrastructure

CCN will continue highlight the severe infrastructure challenges that counties face, and the importance of increased resources to support development and encourage economic growth.

Investment in infrastructure across CCN member areas has been lacking for many years, and the significant increase in housing targets will place further strain on existing infrastructure. The New Towns programme expects new infrastructure such as schools, health services, transport and digital connectivity to be delivered, but this must extend to all areas of new development.

At the beginning of their term, the government outlined their intention to drop plans for a new 'Infrastructure Levy' and instead work to reform Section 106. CCN will work to ensure reforms to developer contributions are delivered and the views of councils are put forward as details of the reforms emerge to ensure that the system is more effective.

The new strategic planning system will also enable areas to better identify infrastructure requirements. CCN will work with areas as new systems and structures are embedded to assess how funding could work better to deliver infrastructure. This includes advocating on the challenges of ageing infrastructure, such as bridges and concrete structures.

However, despite developer contributions and private sector investment, areas will continue to rely on government grants to fund major infrastructure to unlock development sites and we will continue to call for county areas to get a fairer share.

3 Housing & Homelessness

CCN will enhance its support across housing and homelessness services, highlighting the increasing costs of temporary accommodation and influencing the Government's homelessness strategy.

County areas continue to face a housing crisis, with the number of households in temporary accommodation at an all-time high and the associated costs this brings for councils. Moreover, county and rural areas face a number of unique housing challenges, which CCN will bring to the forefront of the national debate through dedicated research programmes this year.

The Government has launched a 'National Plan to End Homelessness' in December 2025, alongside £3.5bn in funding. CCN will work with member councils as the plan is implemented, pushing for fair funding for prevention support and housing-led approaches supported by dedicated funding streams that reduce homelessness sustainably rather than reactively.

The Renters Rights Act achieved Royal Assent in October 2025 bringing with it a tougher stance on landlords by abolishing Section 21 "no-fault" evictions. The Act also introduces a new Decent Homes Standard. CCN will build links with other bodies representing housing organisations, such as the National Housing Federation and Chartered Institute of Housing to strengthen and influence policymaking in this key area for unitary councils.

Planning Reform Advocacy

Extensive engagement with MHCLG on planning reform and the NPPF, advocating the views of CCN member councils. Alongside this, continue calls for better resourcing of planning departments, particularly in a time of intense change facing planning authorities.

Planning reform Implementation

Shaping secondary legislation following the Planning and Infrastructure Act and working with members to understand the implications of the Act and implementation of the NPPF. CCN will also support county councils with the implications of LGR on local planning and housing services.

Spatial Development Strategies

Continue to engage extensively in the development of Spatial Development Strategies, shaping legislation, guidance to local authorities and preparation of SDSs by member councils.

Housing in Counties

Update CCN's 2024 research report *Housing in Counties*, including key statistics in relation to housing delivery and tenure trends, understanding the impact of changing demographics in county areas, alongside associated policy commentary to influence national policy.

Homelessness & Temporary Accommodation

Seek to commission new analysis on the unique challenges facing county and rural areas in tackling homelessness and temporary accommodation pressures. Research to support members to deliver the 'National Plan to end Homelessness', with a focus on prevention and early intervention.

Housing Services

Working with members to shape government policy on housing standards and the implementation of new of the National Homes Standard, as it arises. We will also work to understand the challenges surrounding Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO's) and include this in advocacy where relevant.

Infrastructure Funding

Continuing to highlight the severity of infrastructure funding gaps in county areas. Outline the case for enhanced infrastructure investment, particularly forward funding infrastructure, alongside better provision of utilities and connectivity to support housing and economic growth.

Developer Contributions

Engaging with MHCLG and member councils on any future reforms to the developer contributions system, including potential reforms to Section 106 and the introduction of Mayoral CIL.

Devolution, Growth & Transport

Growing county economies through fair investment, greater devolution and sustainable transport.

1 Devolution

CCN will remain the leading advocate for deeper and faster devolution to county areas, while supporting our member councils to develop strategic authority arrangements.

While the English Devolution Act has progressed through parliament, we have witnessed a marked change in ambition in delivering the original aspirations of the Devolution White Paper for mayoral arrangements to be in place in every area this parliament. Elections in Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) areas have been delayed to 2027 and 2028, while the government have recently announced a focus on establishing Foundation Strategic Authorities (FSAs), rather than further mayoral arrangements.

While FSAs offer areas without a devolution deal the prospect of some new powers, our advocacy over the coming period will continue to highlight the risk of a two-speed approach to devolution in county areas compared to urban cities which could limit our members' strong ambitions to grow their economies.

Alongside arguing for an extension of devolved powers and funding to FSAs and faster progress towards mayoral status, CCN will continue to provide comprehensive support to our member councils on the development of new Strategic Authorities in a county and rural context, while sharing detailed learning from established combined authorities in county areas and those advancing in the DPP areas.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- The network produced briefings on the Devolution & Community Empowerment Act at all stages of its journey through Parliament, highlighting areas of both support and concern. Our Chair also gave evidence to the Parliamentary Bill Committee.
- Throughout the year CCN has actively supported member councils with the development of new strategic authorities, while representing members views on the delay to mayoral elections and pace of devolution to our areas.
- In July, CCN published a major report with Grant Thornton on Fiscal Devolution. This showed that devolving more national taxes to local areas could generate a yearly £4.4bn investment pot for councils and a powerful incentive to increase productivity.
- In December CCN warned that county and rural unitary councils faced a 'cliff edge' in local growth funding with the ending of the Shared Prosperity Fund. This showed our councils would not benefit from Local Growth or Pride in Place funding, putting at risk vital local support for local businesses.
- Continued to showcase the challenging operating environment for rural bus services, with our analysis in June showing that one fifth of 'lifeline' bus routes serving residents in county and rural areas have disappeared over the last five years despite pledges of a bus revolution.

2 Economic Growth

CCN will demonstrate the critical importance of county economies to the government's economic missions, while supporting the development of local growth plans.

Central to advocating for deeper and faster devolution to county areas will be demonstrating the critical importance of rural and polycentric economies to the government's economic missions.

As devolution commitments have been watered down, we have seen an increasing focus from government on city-based growth initiatives. Through major forthcoming research CCN will seek to challenge this direction, evidencing how our areas are driving national growth, while identifying the types of policy levers required to maximise their economic potential.

Central to the government's approach is the statutory rollout of Local Growth Plans, requiring strategic authorities to outline 10-year frameworks for regional economic development that dovetail with the national industrial strategy. CCN will continue to support councils as they develop locally-led strategic growth plans. This includes support through our place-directors group, building on the work undertaken on LEP transition, while publishing a new best practice publication on economic growth in the spring.

More widely, the network will monitor and seek to influence relevant legislation and associated proposals on economic policy impacting local government, in particular in relation to skills, employment, and tourism. This includes making the case for fair regional investment for our areas through new Local Growth Funds and Pride in Place funding (see priority 6), while building on our recent fiscal devolution report to influence the government's commitment to publish a 'roadmap' for fiscal devolution later this year.

3 Transport & Roads

CCN will advocate for fairer funding for road maintenance and highlight challenges facing rural transport, while outlining the benefits of these to communities and local economies.

Road maintenance and potholes remain a significant issue on the doorstep for CCN member areas. While the government has increased funding, the network remains of the view that CCN areas do not receive the quantum of funding proportionate to their road networks. In addition, with the Department for Transport (DfE) publishing road maintenance ratings, there is an increasing spotlight on the performance of councils and a failure to understand the unique challenges facing county and rural areas.

CCN know our members were frustrated with the methodology used behind the ratings and are doing all they can to ensure that roads are well maintained. To demonstrate this, CCN have commissioned WSP to undertake analysis of the challenges facing road maintenance in county and rural areas. This report, to be published in late spring, will also explore proactive maintenance models adopted by authorities to help share best practice.

The government has also set out reforms to local transport, with the Bus Services Act becoming law in October 2025. Bus services are an important lifeline for communities, providing connection to jobs and services, but CCN recognises that franchising and setting up bus companies is unviable for many authorities. We will therefore continue our calls for more suitable reforms and fair funding for county bus services, recognising the additional costs faced for longer more rural routes.

CCN will also undertake further advocacy on recent changes to on-street parking regulations and advocate for councils to be able to adopt ANPR parking technology.

Devolution

CCN will advocate for deeper and faster devolution to county areas and continue to press for parity with urban mayoral authorities, including an extension of devolved powers and funding to FSAs and faster progress towards mayoral status.

Strategic Authorities

Deliver policy support to our member councils on the development of new Strategic Authorities in a county and rural context, while sharing detailed learning from established combined authorities in county areas and those advancing in the DPP areas.

County Economies

Finalise and publish our research with Grant Thornton to ensure county economies are seen as a critical part of the government's economic missions. This will evidence how our areas are driving national growth, while identifying the types of policy levers required to maximise their economic potential.

Local Economic Growth Policy

Influence relevant legislation and proposals on economic policy, in particular in relation to skills, employment, tourism and the government's promised 'roadmap' for fiscal devolution. This includes making the case for fair regional investment for our areas through new Local Growth Funds.

Local Growth Plans

Continue to support councils as they develop locally-led strategic growth plans. This includes support through our place-directors group, building on the work undertaken on LEP transition, while publishing a new best practice publication on economic growth in the spring.

Road Maintenance & Funding

Publish research with WSP on county roads and infrastructure to influence government policy and funding arrangements. This report will demonstrate the scale of the financial and delivery challenges facing county and rural areas, while exploring proactive maintenance models adopted by authorities.

County Buses

CCN will monitor the impact of the Bus Services Act, alongside the implementation of devolved powers to strategic authorities in county areas. The network will continue our calls for fairer funding for rural bus services, recognising the additional costs faced for longer more rural routes.

Parking & Electric Vehicle Infrastructure

CCN will undertake further advocacy on recent changes to on-street parking regulations and advocate for councils to be able to adopt ANPR parking technology. CCN will also continue to make the case for better investment in EV charging points and associated infrastructure in county areas to encourage better take-up of electric vehicles.

Communities, Leisure & Environment

Supporting our communities and protecting our environment through delivering essential everyday services.

1 Communities

CCN will work to support CCN members as leaders of place and help them to meet their ambition to create great places for residents to live and work in.

Over the coming year as part of our *Stronger Counties, Stronger Communities* campaign, CCN will have an increasing focus on the role of county and unitary councils as leaders of place. From tackling socio-economic challenges of isolation and poor social mobility, to improving community safety and putting in place new Neighbourhood Governance, this will demonstrate that our councils are closest to the realities facing their communities.

In September the government announced it would support local community-building through its *Pride in Place Programme*, supporting 250 neighbourhoods across Britain. However, despite welcoming the intention behind this initiative, only a small number of communities within CCN member areas are set to benefit. Following our advocacy on this issue in December 2025 and ahead of the announcement of phase 2, CCN will work to ensure that members can continue to be able to access funding and opportunities to further build resilient local communities.

Separately, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will introduce a requirement for all councils to establish effective neighbourhood governance. CCN will continue to support member councils as these new duties become law, influencing forthcoming regulations and sharing emerging approaches across the membership.

What we delivered in 2025/26

- Hosted Home Office officials at a meeting for Leaders to provide an update on the proposed policing reforms, providing an opportunity for members to seek clarity on how rural areas will be policed when forces are merged.
- Represented CCN members on the National Alliance for Cultural Services, and at a DCMS libraries forum considering the future of library services.
- In December CCN warned that county and rural unitary councils faced losing out on vital community funding, with most CCN councils being overlooked for Pride in Place funding.
- CCN has engaged with the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act requirement establish effective neighbourhood governance, contributing to ministerial roundtables and advising members on the implications.
- The network launched a new report *Rural resilience: Challenges and opportunities of the green transition* which highlights both the challenges and opportunities presented to rural areas in the face of the green transition and showcases leadership and innovation.
- Supported officers and politicians sitting on the Local Net Zero Delivery Group, and associated Net Zero Working Group reporting directly into the Department of Energy and Net Zero. A CCN Spokesperson also attended a Ministerial roundtable on waste with Mary Creagh MP.

In January this year the government published a new white paper on policing, setting out significant reforms that could lead to a reduction in the number of police forces in operation across England.

CCN has begun the process of engagement on this issue with Home Office officials and will represent member views as the proposals are developed further. The network will seek to ensure that new force boundaries recognise local views and the challenges of policing across large rural areas. With the abolition of the remaining Police and Crime Commissioners, CCN will also seek to influence new accountability arrangements so they are fit for purpose, enabling effective scrutiny in the future through the democratic mandate of county and unitary councils.

2 Leisure & Culture

CCN will support members with the delivery of everyday services, helping them protect, modernise and co-locate community, leisure and cultural assets.

With the exception of libraries, leisure and cultural services are not statutory, yet remain popular, well-used everyday services that support councils' ambitions to improve the health and wellbeing of local communities.

As a result of tight budgetary situation, councils have innovated significantly in this area, co-locating services to increase footfall and reduce overheads through estate rationalisation. But the pressure on non-statutory will continue over the coming years.

CCN will continue facilitate sharing of best-practice on these service areas, ensuring that county and unitary councils' voices are heard, and that the wider financial challenges faced by councils are understood across the leisure and culture sectors.

3

Waste & Environment

CCN will engage with member on the roll out of waste reforms to ensure that they remain proportionate, while advocating the role of councils in environmental services and sustainability.

At the end of March 2026, a series of reforms to waste collection under the new Simpler Recycling policy will come into force. These are designed to standardise recycling collections across households and businesses. Alongside this the government has continued to progress its Extended Producer Responsibility for packaging.

From our engagement with our unitary councils and government during the development of these proposals, we know that their implementation will more challenging in county and rural areas. As such, the network will continue to support member councils to deliver consistent, efficient and compliant waste and recycling services, while advocating to secure sustainable funding and fairer cost recovery for CCN member councils.

More widely, the role of county and unitary authorities in environmental sustainability and climate resilience remains important. The government continues to make progress with its Nature Recovery Programme, and is also seeking to secure greater climate adaptation and mitigation through changes to infrastructure and public realm.

CCN will represent members on these issues, so that councils' needs are taken into account when the government is taking forward existing or new schemes. Moreover, building on our report last year, CCN will continue to highlight the role of our member councils in the challenges and opportunities presented to rural areas in the face of the green transition, while engaging with government through our membership of the Local Net-Zero Delivery Group.

Investing in Communities

Monitor the roll out of government schemes such as *Pride in Place*, to ensure that they address underlying issues for the communities selected; and advocate on behalf of members so that their role as leaders as place is recognised when the government designs future schemes.

National Police Reforms

Engage the government and policing bodies so that members' voices on future force boundaries, accountability and rural policing are taken into account.

Neighbourhood Governance

CCN will continue to support member councils as new Neighbourhood Governance duties become law, influencing forthcoming regulations and sharing emerging approaches across the membership.

Supporting Leisure and Culture Services

Support county areas to protect, modernise and co-locate community, leisure and cultural assets. Influence national funding and policy to secure sustainable investment in community services and leisure, demonstrating and promoting their role in prevention, health and wellbeing.

Waste and Recycling Reforms

Influence national waste policy to secure sustainable funding and fairer cost recovery for CCN member councils. Support member councils to deliver consistent, efficient and compliant waste and recycling services, including on extended producer responsibility and collections consistency.

Future-Proofing Waste & Environmental Services

Promote investment in waste and environmental services, including infrastructure, skills and innovation to improve recycling performance, resilience and environmental outcomes, particularly in rural areas.

Local Nature Recovery and Biodiversity Net Gain

Supporting county and unitary authorities to lead delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Net Gain, ensuring they are properly resourced and aligned with planning and growth ambitions.

Climate Resilience

Champion place-based investment and partnership working to strengthen climate resilience, biodiversity and long-term environmental sustainability, including through our membership of the Local Net-Zero Delivery Group.

CCN

THE VOICE OF COUNTIES

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

In total, the 21 county councils and 18 unitary councils that make up the CCN represent 27 million residents, account for 39% of England's GVA, and deliver high-quality services that matter the most to local communities.

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