Conclusions and Next Steps

This year's report provides an evidence-based picture of the initial impacts of COVID-19 on Local Government services and the communities they serve. The evidence reveals the extraordinary effort and achievements delivered across Local Government during this exceptional period, adapting quickly to meet new demands, maintain essential services and implement new ways of working. 2020/21 LGBF data also indicates that the shock delivered by COVID-19 is likely to substantially disrupt performance and efficiency improvements gained in previous years, at least in the short term.

The next phase will be even more challenging as councils attempt to recover and renew. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the context we operate within, the design and delivery of Local Government services, and the pattern of need in the communities we serve. Going forward, the continuity provided by the LGBF will be invaluable in understanding the long-term impact of the pandemic on communities and on Local Government services. It will provide vital intelligence to assist the sector to learn lessons from its response and to strengthen and redesign services around future policy priorities to support recovery and renewal. It will also be critical in helping all spheres of government to track progress against the National Performance Framework (NPF) and in informing the reprioritisation that has and will continue to be made in the years to come.

While this report presents national trends across each service area for 2020/21, critically it also highlights the significant variation which sits beneath this. While the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on all councils, local areas experienced the impacts of this pandemic differently. LGBF performance and expenditure data from 2020/21 reveal substantial variation in both the direction and scale of impacts. It is this variation that will provide the essential platform and 'can openers' to help councils evaluate their approach during the pandemic and to inform their recovery priorities. With the acute and far reaching effects of COVID-19, there has never been a greater requirement for working with, and learning from, each other.

The Local Government Benchmarking Board continues to review and evolve the LGBF to reflect the new challenges and issues facing Local Government post-COVID, including innovation and transformation in the use of data and intelligence. The following three strategic priorities have been identified to drive progress and support transformation across the next 3-year period.

1. To continue to strengthen the relevance and credibility of LGBF

We will evolve the LGBF framework to reflect the challenges, risks and opportunities facing Local Government as it responds to the pandemic and aims to build back better. We will work with Solace, Professional Associations and other key stakeholders to protect and promote the longitudinal significance of the framework, and the value provided by existing LGBF measures in capturing the impact of COVID-19 on long-term trends across core council services. We will strengthen the framework in key areas to reflect the changing context and ensure the approach remains fit for purpose. This will include a strengthened focus on key areas such as poverty and inequality, mental health and wellbeing, new ways of working and digital transformation. We will also continue to strengthen links between the LGBF and the National Performance Framework and Public Health priorities to support Local Government in its efforts to demonstrate how it is supporting progress in these areas.

2. To position the LGBF to lead improvements in the wider data reporting and scrutiny landscape

Rapid progress has been achieved both locally and nationally in data sharing, data collaboration and data innovation, facilitated by the increased focus on the role of data and intelligence during the pandemic. We will build on this, and ensure the LGBF is at the heart of progressing system wide improvements in addressing current lags in data availability, streamlining data reporting/scrutiny landscapes, enabling greater automation and technical integration of data systems, and strengthening available insights from data and intelligence. We

will support the development of the Local Government Data Portal, an ambitious transformation programme to deliver improvements in the way Local Government manages and uses data.

3. To continue to build momentum in the use of the LGBF to transform and improve council services

Demonstrating how councils are utilising data and intelligence to transform and improve services will be more important than ever across the coming period. As the framework has matured, councils' use of the LGBF to support collaboration, improvement and strategic decision making has grown and become more sophisticated. We will prioritise support and engagement activities which will build on this progress, and effectively assist councils in their efforts to use data and intelligence, including the LGBF, to transform and improve services as part of recovery and renewal across the next 3 years.