

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION



Liberal Democrats once again saw a year of net gain of councillors, including seizing control of Tunbridge Wells (front cover) for the first time since the mid 1990s. From Winchester and Gloucester over to Watford and up to Preston and Barnsley, Lib Dems celebrated some excellent results.



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www.libdemgroup.lga.gov.uk/lga-lib-dem-group

A message from the **Leader of the LGA Liberal Democrat Group**



Councillor Joe Harris

Leader of the LGA Liberal Democrat Group

As I write this, following on another round of local elections, more Liberal Democrat councillors across the country are in positions of power and influence. This means taking control of their council or having a key role as we celebrate another year of gains. We now have over 3,100 councillors across the UK. As of mid-May we hold the leadership of 68 councils and take part in the leadership of another eight. More Lib Dem councillors were elected this May than Conservatives!

- 505 Lib Dem councillors were elected, a net gain of 104 councillors, bringing the total numbers of Lib Dem councillors across the UK to over 3,100.
- We gained overall control of two more councils - true blue Tunbridge Wells now has a Lib Dem majority on the council - and Dorset is now a Liberal Democrat Council for the first time ever.
- We retained control of all 10 councils that we were defending from Stockport to Eastleigh.
- We are the largest party in eight more councils and increased our councillor numbers in 38 councils.

You may recall that last year I was re-elected unopposed as Group Leader – as was my Deputy, Cllr Bridget Smith. Thank you to everyone who showed their confidence in us.

It's been another busy year as the LGA adjusted to a change in the political leadership of the organisation – after many years the Conservatives lost the position of LGA Chair as Labour became the largest party following the 2023 local elections. We also saw a new LGA Chief Executive, Joanna Killian, appointed.

As we remind colleagues from other political groups, no one party has an overall majority at the LGA and we remain a cross-party organisation!

Our own group has continued to grow in size with Liberal Democrats now holding over 15 per cent of the vote at the LGA – our strongest showing since 2011.

Of course, before the next local elections in 2025 we have had a General Election, and we hope there will be a sizeable increase in the number of Liberal Democrat MPs in the Commons to help us get a fair deal for local government. Hopefully this will also see more MPs returned with experience of being councillors! The LGA is getting ready for a possible change of government but whoever wins we will be in a good position to lobby them and press for change.

Keeping in touch with our councillors

We keep Liberal Democrat councillors updated with the LGA Lib Dem Group's work through various means including a weekly email to our councillors on LGA member authorities. Let the office know if you have some good practice to share in it! I also report back every month via the LGA First magazine, and events like our fringe meetings at LGA and Lib Dem conferences, and other meetings with our councillors such as zoom catch ups with our council and opposition leaders. I also arrange to visit Lib Dem Councils and Council Groups when possible.

Last but certainly not least is the work we carry out supporting Liberal Democrat run councils and groups, including the Change of Control programme following each round of local elections, helping groups to either adjust to being in power – or in a few cases – moving into opposition.

Working with the wider party

We work alongside the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, keeping in touch with their Chair and staff on a regular basis. We fund the 'Be A Councillor' and 'Next Generation' programmes for Lib Dem Councillors which they run on our behalf, and funding the annual Councillors Weekend. We also work with ALDC in submitting motions and amendments to motions at Liberal Democrat Conferences. We regularly meet with Party Leader Ed Davey and with Party President Mark Pack and Chief Executive Mike Dixon.

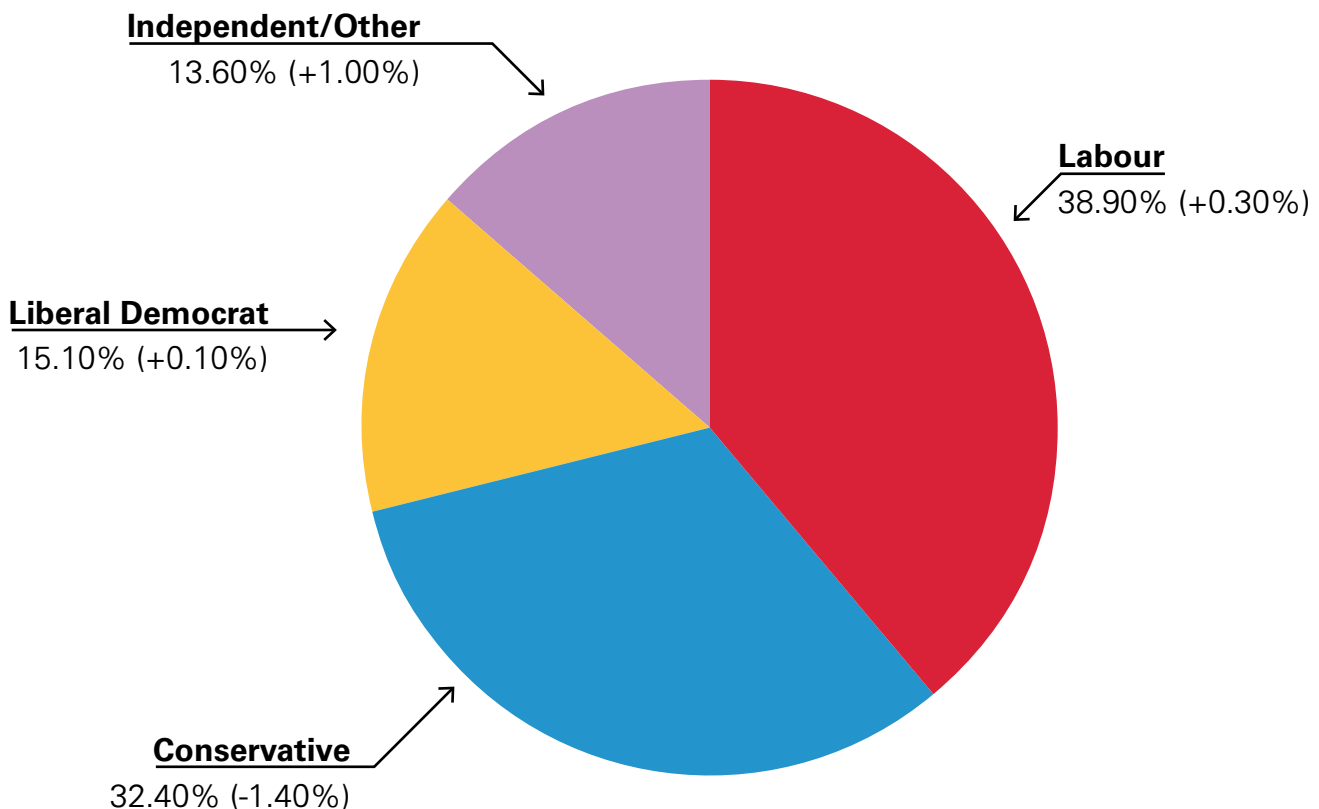
Lobbying for local government

In addition to this, we meet with Liberal Democrat MPs and Peers when they hold 'cluster' meetings on subjects including local government, health and social care, transport, climate change and children/young people's services. We work with our party in parliament to table amendments to bills, Early Day Motions and questions to ministers in the Lords and Commons.

And there is another key element of the Group's work in the cross-party lobbying for local government that the LGA does – including hard work from our Board members. They influence the positions taken by the LGA subject boards including contributing to government consultations and seeking amendments to parliamentary bills, sometimes giving evidence to Select Committees on behalf of Local Government. My thanks to them and you can see their report in this document, do take time to read them so you can gain an idea of the extent of the work they do.

Political balance 2024-2025 of the LGA

As a cross-party membership organisation, the LGA's governance is determined by the strength of its four political groups. Following the local elections each year, Plymouth University's Elections Centre calculates the proportionality figures using a formula that takes account of the number of council seats held by each group and the population and type of authority that they represent. No other party has enough of a share at the LGA to meet the five per cent threshold to qualify for group status.



The LGA Liberal Democrat Group Leadership Team



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LGA Liberal Democrat Board members 2023-2025

Liberal Democrat Group Executive and Board Members 2023-2025

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LGA Commercial Advisory Board



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Liberal Democrat Vice Presidents of the LGA

Every year the four political groups at the LGA invite parliamentary representatives from the House of Commons and House of Lords to be our Vice Presidents. They support the LGA in Parliament - helping to raise our concerns in Parliament and from time-to-time hosting events. The current list of Liberal Democrat Vice Presidents is below and we thank them all for their support:

Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville

Baroness Brinton

Baroness Janke

Baroness Pinnock

Baroness Scott of Needham Market

Baroness Thornhill

Sir Ed Davey MP

Daisy Cooper MP

Helen Morgan MP

Layla Moran MP

Lord Scriven

Lord Shipley

Lord Storey

Lord Tope

Tim Farron MP

Wera Hobhouse MP

LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Children and Young People Board

Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson



Campaigning opportunities for Liberal Democrat councillors

Many councils are facing serious overspends in this area. Both children's social care and SEND (particularly home to school transport) are under significant pressure. Where we are not in control this gives us a chance to hit either the Conservatives or Labour for financial incompetence.

Work I and my Lib Dem Board colleagues have done since the last report

We are working on the following issues:

- High-cost placements in children's social care. Councils are being ripped off by private sector providers. Could councils working together drive down costs? Government Ministers are opposed to limiting profits of private sector companies. Hopefully the next Government is better.
- Children's mental health, an area where things got much worse over the pandemic.
- Cost of SEND, especially Home to School Transport. There is work taking place on a new way to define SEND as the current system is broken. I'm pushing for a workshop to share best practice on coping with the home to school budget.
- Roll out of increase in early years provision where the funding from the government is well below what is needed, but councils have a legal duty to make sure places are available.

Work I am planning to do

All of the above, plus working with the Parliamentary Team, who seem very education centred.

What is going well

It's a good Board where we work well and cross party.

What areas need future improvement.

We need to work closer as a Lib Dem team. I've met with the parliamentary team and this needs developing.

Key points of the Board's work or other key issues to be aware of within the LGA

Council budgets are under extreme pressure because of pressures in both adults and children's services.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

LGA Liberal Democrat Group Whip

Councillor Heather Kidd



Tithing

Liberal Democrats council groups should, have ensured their members are contributing 10 per cent gross from Basic and Special Responsibility allowances. This is particularly relevant post the May 2023 and now the May 2024 council elections.

Group contract

As a reminder the Group contract was introduced several years ago, setting out the expectations of all those who hold Group offices or serve on the various LGA boards, panels and related organisations. It was updated last year, giving improved clarity on the responsibilities. Following the 2023 Group elections, all those elected to Group positions are expected to sign and observe the Group contract.

Council group Standing orders¹ were updated in 2022. Many council groups have now updated theirs to reflect these. Groups need to review theirs with the Council group Toolkit.

A voting toolkit for AGMs will also be available in the near future.

Reports and attendance

A summary of attendance of board members is included within this report. The report format was standardised a few years ago and aids in helping Lead Members give a brief summary of their work on the Boards in each cycle. I am grateful that these have mostly arrived on time. Thank you all for your support in this.

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1. <http://www.aldc.org/2024/03/model-group-standing-orders/>

LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Community Wellbeing Board

Councillor Sarah Osborne



Thankfully, this year we have had some significant wins.

Firstly, the Government eventually listened to the longstanding concerns of the LGA and councils to ban disposable vapes. Our Board in particular lobbied hard for this and for plans to tackle smoking. Although we look forward to working with the Government and others to enforce the ban as well as the ensure plans for a smokefree generation are a success, we are seeking an increase in the fines councils can impose on retailers who breach the law. We are also pressing for sufficient lead in time and comprehensive guidance provided ahead of the legislation coming into force so that councils, retailers and others understand their new obligations and can prepare accordingly.

Following our lobbying, we secured a second significant win when the government agreed that local authorities would not have to meet the extra in year costs related to the pay award from NHS providers and next year, the increase will be banked into the Public Health grant. However, experience has taught us we will need to be hawklike to ensure Local Authorities are not short changed and left covering NHS pay rises without the corresponding increase in the Public Health grant.

I chaired a session at the National Children and Adult Services Conference Session on Older People's Housing and had the immense pleasure of introducing Daisy Cooper MP who gave the keynote address at the annual Public Health Conference. I went on to chair the panel discussion on 'A Vision for Transforming the Nation's Health'. It was heartening to hear the consensus from the expert panel on the importance of adequately funding Public Health. We all agreed that the current focus on treating sickness, rather than preventing it, is unsustainable. It overwhelms our NHS, with millions waiting for treatment. To break this cycle, we must prioritise prevention and early intervention.

Similar messages were included in interesting and informative presentations to our panel by Sir Michael Marmot on Health Inequalities and Chris Whitty (Chief Medical Officer for England) on Healthy Ageing.

I continue to make the case for adequate multi-year settlements for Adult Social Care and for Public Health and I do not support the use of single word ratings in Adult Social Care Assurance. The LGA has consistently said its biggest concern regarding assurance was the damaging impact of comparing apples with oranges.

It was great to have caught up with some of the Lib Dem portfolio holders at the recent National Adult and Children's Services Conference and to discuss the pressures facing us all - and of course to share some good practice. I also meet regularly with the CYP Board and we are now working alongside the People and Places and City Regions Boards on Economic Inactivity and Health as well.

We are continuing to raise concerns around the roll out of 'Right Care, Right Person' the National Agreement on Policing and Mental Health, fearing the proposed rapid rollout presents a significant risk to people experiencing mental distress, and those who care for them.

As always, the Lib Dem office team have been a great support.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

Councillor Liz Green



Last year, my predecessor, Gerald Vernon-Jackson, reported on the work the Culture, Tourism and Sport board did successfully to get support for the rising costs of running and maintaining swimming facilities. A total of £83 million has now been distributed, both revenue and capital, to over 300 swimming pools across the country. This has been a lifeline for

many, but there is still more investment needed if we are to have energy efficient, first class, easily accessible swimming for everyone.

Last August, the Government announced that it wanted to get 3.5 million people (including 1 million children) more active by 2030 through their Get Active strategy. On the back of it, they launched the National Physical Activity Taskforce. The LGA was not initially invited to be part of the taskforce, but by pointing out that council's own most of the swimming pools, leisure facilities and sports pitches, as well as maintaining all the parks and open spaces, we showed we are a key player in this field. Additionally, for it to work it needs to be implemented locally and no one knows their communities as well as councillors do, so no strategy can work without our involvement. Fortunately, we were heard and I have attended the three meetings so far, as well as being involved in the place based paper with Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC). We are yet to see how this will bear fruit, but I will keep banging the drum for local solutions involving councils, not just government departments talking to each other.

Spending on culture and arts by councils has dominated the headlines after this year's budgets. Birmingham had to announce huge reductions and others declared they would remove all this discretionary spend, only to be saved at the last minute by the very late Government announcement of extra funding. It is a real worry for the creative sector, many of whom rely on their local council helping with funding to keep going, not to mention all the museums, libraries, monuments and castles that councils own. Our

Lords team have raised this several times in the House. Interviewed by Association for Cultural Enterprise, I reiterated that councillors value the arts and creative industries, but demand led budgets are leading to many difficult decisions for local authorities. I asked the sector to help us spread the word that local government needs proper funding if it is to halt the descent towards just being administration offices for children's and adults social care and housing.

The board has considered how we best make the case for place-based investment and further devolution in the CTS sector in a way that will further support already locally-led services. We have worked with think tanks, local government officers, universities, and arms-length bodies to develop a compelling suite of think pieces looking at what needs to happen to enable place-based investment, ranging from governance structures and accountability, recognising social infrastructure, and using lived experience to inform decision-making. Read them on the LGA website by searching for Devolution Think Pieces.

This year saw the first LGA training for officers working in visitor economy and tourism area, as well as further Leadership Essentials training in Cultural Services and Sport and Physical Activity. Additionally, peer challenges in libraries and culture are available free of charge to councils.

The board has been looking at the option of a tourism levy and has successfully lobbied for a register of short term lets and specific planning use classes for these premises, now agreed in principle and with details to be consulted on. We regularly have visitors to talk at our Board meetings and Visit England are due next month.

There is so much I could tell if space permitted – our calls for evidence on increasing activity for women and girls; report on the state of the sector – visitor economy; introduction to archives; working with Sports England, UKActive, CLOA, Visit England and more; reaching the less active report; select committee; libraries sounding board and loads of webinars.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board

Councillor Vikki Slade



The scope of the board has been developing since we changed from the EEHT and after the great work done by the previous board to get a higher profile around the influence that local government can have on the capacity to reach Net Zero. The LGA is now offering a wider programme of training and development around climate change.

The Government has deprioritised issues around climate change as we moved into General Election year and the effectiveness of the Local Net Zero Forum has been a hot topic.

Transport

We have been invited to join the council for Net Zero Transport. This remains a key topic for the LINZ board, and we recently worked with other boards on an Economic Inclusion and Transport project. This will be presented to political parties will seek to influence their manifestos. The recommendations look to be broadly in line with our Liberal Democrat policy on improving the take up of public transport among young people and I am looking forward to chairing a session at the forthcoming LGA conference on improving bus services.

I have helped provide evidence about a range of transport issues including fines for drivers, pavement parking, EV charging and inflationary costs in infrastructure projects.

Housing

As a group we came very close to a consensus on seeking the removal of Right to Buy but some members (no prizes for guessing which party!) felt this would be a step too far. The final cross-party position was to make 100 per cent retention of receipts permanent, councils deciding on levels of RTB discounts (if any) and a considerable extension to the period before which Right to Buy is allowed.

Building safety continues to be a standing item on our agendas and I was privileged to chair a session at the 2023 LGA conference around the right of everyone to have a safe, warm home. With Awaab's Law now enacted, local authorities will be able to do more to ensure that the condition in which tenants live are improved. Work on renters rights continues.

A lot of work has been going on to raise the issues of homelessness and we continue to support Shelter in challenging the narrative around rough sleeping. We were also successful in getting cross-party support in calling out the disgraceful proposals to make it more difficult for people who were not born in the UK to qualify for social housing.

Town centres and Planning

I have led work around the Future of High Streets, chairing an LGA webinar looking at how town centres are changing and giving evidence at a House of Lords Committee. I also represented the LGA in Ministerial meetings about the upcoming High Street (Designation and Review) Bill expressing the concerns of councils on permitted development rights. Work continues to get the Government to support our work on brownfield development.

Net Zero

Our former lead member on this board, Pippa Heylings, led the way in getting Net Zero on the agenda. However, we have met resistance from key individuals to attend our meetings. Ministers and the Environment Agency have cancelled at late notice when we have called them to discuss issues around grid capacity and water cleanliness. These, with a solution to the problems of nutrient neutrality and net zero homes, are the priorities under the Net Zero area of work that I will be taking forward alongside my fantastic Board members Victor Chamberlain and Paula Widdowson and our sub Roger Hayes.

With the general election around the corner we have a real opportunity to use our influence within the Local Government Association and use the incredible work in our Board to influence the political manifestos and form a key part of the next Government's agenda.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Improvement and Innovation Board

Councillor Tim Pickstone



Hopefully you will be aware of the services provided by the ALDC for its member authorities. This 'sector led improvement work' is funded by a separate grant from DLUHC, a grant which has been renewed with an uplift for 2024-25.

The services include experienced staff to guide and advise local authorities (Regional Lead Peers), National Peers appointed through the political groups and the Peer Challenge, helping councils identify issues and improve ourselves.

It also includes a whole host of training for elected members and officers, and programmes that you will be very familiar with such as the Next Generation, the Leadership Programme and the LGA's own data platform LG Inform.

OFLOG

One of the key issues the Improvement and Innovation Board has been dealing with in recent months has been developments at OFLOG. This Office for Local Government has been set up by Government with a potentially very similar agenda to the LGA's sector led improvement. The LGA has been engaging proactively and positively with OFLOG as it develops its work, but it remains to be seen what the long-term impact on the LGA will be.

Peers and Peer Reviews

The Board has worked with the Political Group Offices to review the work of elected members who have been appointed as 'Peers' to undertake not only the above Peer Challenges, but also other Peer work commissioned by councils or the LGA.

We have reviewed the training, the processes and the assurances around peer appointment to make sure this continues to be a high quality and consistent service across all four political groups.

Local Government Improvement and Assurance Framework

The Board has been involved in the development of the above, which has been going through extensive consultation this year. We are hoping to bring together the different ways that local councils find assurance (audit, Standards Committees, Statutory Officers) into a single piece of guidance and best practice. Consultation is nearing the end and we are hoping that there will be a final version of this soon.

Innovation Zone

Finally, just to highlight the Innovation Zone, again taking place at this year's LGA Conference. This is short presentations on some of the great innovations taking place in local government. With some people still to be confirmed, there are already four Liberal Democrat run council's on the list to showcase some of the great things that we are delivering on the ground.

Thank you

My thanks to my fellow Liberal Democrat Board members: Councillor Mike Every and Mayor Peter Taylor, to our substitute member Councillor Paul Crossley and our Liberal Democrat National Peer Councillor Alan Connett.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you require further information:

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Economy and Resources Board

Councillor Keith House



The Economy and Resources Board leads for the LGA on a range of financial issues for local government: pay, terms and conditions, workforce, welfare reform and the remnants of COVID and EU funding. The new Board format has added in economic policy (which has yet to see significant Board activity) and elections.

The Lib Dem team this year has been expanded to three, and I am very grateful for the experience and insightful commentary from Lucy Nethsingha and Michael Headley.

Much of the Resources Boards' work has been business as usual: lobbying government on fair funding, handling pay negotiations through National Employers, and understanding the mess that is the broken audit system.

Government has failed to deliver on long-promised reviews and updates on fair funding, business rates review and changes to new homes bonus and more. Short-termism, with three Prime Ministers and a plethora of Ministers in different roles has not created a stable climate for long-term decisions. Realistically the work of the Board is now focused on influencing a new government after the General Election. A joint project with CIPFA and SOLACE is looking to resurrect work on funding.

Pay has been the Board's biggest issue through the year. It will again be one of the most complex issues over the coming year as planned increases in the National Minimum Wage (NMW) continue to put pressure on lower pay points and put pressure upwards on pay bands. Last year's pay offer to the unions was tabled in February yet only accepted in November. This year, another flat-rate pay offer has been agreed by National Employers. At the time of writing, union reaction has been muted despite a progressive offer that is ahead of inflation for most employees.

A rescaling of pay bands is needed to cope with the NMW: this is a major piece of work that needs to sit alongside a two or three-year local government finance settlement.

The audit system remains broken. System-wide failure has been caused by a lack of qualified audit staff, a sector that lacks competition, increased regulatory burden and inaction by government and regulators. Many hundreds of audits remain delayed with some authorities having a backlog of several years. Complex proposals with backstop dates for disclaimed audits are proving hard to get agreement on across the system and risk incomplete or abandoned audits including at councils are risk of financial failure. This problem will take years to fix and would be helped by a simplified audit process.

Social policy to protect and enhance benefits has been a priority for the Board. We fought a rearguard action to protect the Household Support fund that has belatedly been extended to September yet needs long-term funding.

The Board has contributed to thoughts on changes to elections, responding to the DLUHC Select Committee inquiry seeking, with only limited success, to broaden voter ID eligibility and seek new burdens funds for additional workload, and also meeting with the Local Government Minister.

Finally, to record my thanks to our team at the LGA in Smith Square, who have given me fulsome support on the Board in a year of increasing complexity.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Safer and Stronger Communities Board

Councillor Heather Kidd



The Board has covered a wide range of issues this year with several new areas coming to the fore. Many areas overlap with other Boards and joint work is important.

The main areas covered this year include:

Prevent The board continues to work on the Prevent Review. The annual two-day LGA

Prevent and counter-extremism leadership essentials was valuable for all those attending. It brought together a range of organisations including the Home Office, the SIGCE, the police and others.

Food Standards Agency (FSA)

The Food safety update, focussed on areas such as workforce and capacity issues in local government food standards and safety. FSA is concerned because food inspections have not returned to pre-covid levels, and the presentation looked at reasons for this including local authority workforce and capacity issues. Their aim is to raise the profile of food safety with senior leaders in the sector and they plan to write to local authorities asking them to share concerns and prompting adequate funding to these statutory services.

Work force capacity was reviewed by most Boards and SSCB concentrated on problems recruiting in Licencing, Environmental Health, and Trading Standards. These are poorly represented to the public and find it difficult to recruit despite being interesting career paths. Apprenticeships are being used. This was referred to the FSA.

Law Commission – Burial and cremation law – there has been work on this area pending a possible update of the law. Much of this is still confidential but now overlaps with the regulation of funeral directors.

Regulation of funeral directors

The recent news stories about the operations of the Legacy Independent Funeral Directors in Hull have shone a light on the funeral industry. There is currently no regulatory regime in place for funeral directors, except in Scotland, beyond the voluntary schemes run by two trade associations, the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the National Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF). There are around 7000 funeral directors in the country. DLUHC are keen to find a way to regulate this. Work is ongoing.

XL Bully ban

XL Bully Dogs have been added to the Dangerous Dogs Act. Councils are responsible for collecting stray XL Bullies and putting them down after seven days if no owner comes forward. Councils are facing a number of challenges related to the ban: funding, typing a suspected banned breed, and kennel space.

Shisha policy

Over the past few years, a number of councils have called for more licensing powers to tackle shisha bars that repeatedly break regulations, as well as expressing concerns about the health impact shisha premises can have. To support councils, a policy paper making the case for reform to Government was prepared.

Re-offending and Probation

The Board reviewed the policy positions that were published in Going Straight (2005) to ensure they remain relevant in light of developments in the field of reducing re-offending and supporting councils' community safety teams in these areas.

Domestic Homicide Reviews

Domestic abuse is the most common form of violence against women and girls. Tragically, in some cases, domestic abuse (DA) can lead to the death of a victim. A Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) is an opportunity for national and local agencies, local communities and society to pay attention to each individual victim and to treat every death as preventable.

The Government is now revisiting the statutory guidance to ensure DHRs continue to drive learning and action to prevent domestic abuse related deaths. The consultation comes as key legislative changes to the DHR process are set to be made. The new guidance also seeks to better reflect current processes, for example, changes have been made to reflect when a victim of domestic abuse has died by suicide. Work is ongoing on a response to Government.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Fire Service Management Committee and Fire Commission

Councillor Carolyn Lambert



It has been a busy year for the LGA Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC) and the Fire Commission.

I would like to thank all the colleagues who have been involved in work with the Fire Services this year both on local Fire Authorities and nationally on the FSMC and Fire Commission, including Lord Goddard of Stockport, our Fire and Rescue spokesperson in the House of Lords. It was a privilege to be elected as Lead Member in place of Cllr Keith Aspden, and I would like to thank Keith for all his hard work over the last six years and for his personal support in my new role.

All of us in local government are facing continued financial restrictions with serious implications for services and the Fire and Rescue Service is no exception. One of Keith's key tasks last year was sitting on the National Joint Council (NJC) for wage negotiations. The NJC model was under attack from the Conservative government who would have preferred a pay review body, and it was a mark of real success that the wage negotiations for the Fire and Rescue Sector, although lengthy, were successfully resolved without the strike action we saw in so many other areas. The Home Office are now funding a self-led review of the NJC which will be an important focus for work over the next few months.

There has been national concern, rightly, over issues of culture with several services receiving improvement support from the Fire Performance and Oversight Group (FPOG). Lead members have expressed concern however over the lack of clarity for entry into this group and the criteria needed to successfully achieve the improvements required.

Building Safety legislation continues to be a key concern and equally a

pressure on resources as much of the required work remains unfunded. Colleagues on Fire Authorities will also be very aware of the difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified staff and I will continue to lobby and push for appropriate funding and support for this important area of our work.

HMICFRS (the Inspectorate) are now conducting their third round of inspections into Fire and Rescue Services. It is clearly important that we have national standards and that the work of the service is open, transparent and accountable. However, it is equally important that the Inspectorate's recommendations are properly evidenced and flexible enough to take account of local governance arrangements. One size does not fit all and I will continue to challenge, along with colleagues, any pressure for the imposition of Police Fire and Crime Commissioners. A further area of concern remains the government's insistence on aligning the Fire and Rescue Service with the Police, including the proposal for a Police and Fire College. I will continue to argue for a stand-alone College of Fire.

Finally, the LGA held another successful Fire Conference in Bristol in March 2024. I chaired a panel on Community Risk Management Planning and spoke at another panel on Efficiency and Productivity in the sector. I was delighted that Lord Goddard of Stockport was able to attend and speak at the conference. His contribution was extremely well received by delegates.

Looking forward, there is much important work to be done, including consideration of operational independence, tackling recruitment and retention issues for our on-call fire fighters and continuing to address the impact of climate change in a deeply challenging financial environment.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

City Regions Board

Councillor Gareth Roberts



The old order changeth, yielding place to new and this has certainly been the case at the City Regions Board as we have welcomed our new Chair, Cllr Satvir Kaur from Plymouth. Those with a long memory may recall that we lost our previous chair when Marvin Rees found his services as Mayor of Bristol surplus to the requirements of Bristol residents, and therefore

a new chair was required.

However, even though there has been plus ça change in terms of chair and one or two lead members, the work of the committee itself is still very much plus c'est la même chose.

So, we have been continuing with our five main themes:

Theme one: The future of Cities

Theme two: Levelling Up Theme

Theme three: Urban resilience

Theme four: Green jobs

Theme five: Growth funding

While it would be difficult to summarise the work in the various strands, two particular points are worth bearing in mind.

Firstly, in partnership with our colleagues at the People and Places Board we have been lobbying the Government in relation to the incoming policy of Universal Support. Our main, but by no means exclusive, asks include ensuring that sufficient time is taken to build up to a stable system which will offer genuine engagement for people who may have been economically inactive for some time. That there are sufficient guarantees of multi-year funding to support people entering the system. That councils will receive the funding needed to establish the service base in their locale. That Universal Support remains a voluntary scheme, not a stick with which to beat the most disadvantaged.

The second point is that we are continuing to build on the success of the Urban Summit model which we have been developing over recent years. The Urban Summit brings together urban leaders, academics, think tanks, and others with an interest in the future of urban local government to discuss and affirm the actions and asks required for the future growth and resilience of our cities.

The Summit further provides an opportunity to engage with politicians, key national decision makers, local government and experts on the strategic challenges and opportunities facing cities, and the priorities of urban leaders following local elections and ahead of the upcoming general election.

So, there you have it. A snapshot of what we do. If you would like to know more then do drop me an email.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

People and Places Board

Councillor Caroline Leaver



The People and Places Board seeks to develop greater clarity on the role of non-metropolitan councils in enabling economic growth for the long-term benefit of residents, and on how transformation in public services can enable that.

The Board's Terms of Reference were widened following Labour taking the LGA Chairmanship to include strategic housing and transport.

Core business for People and Places relates to the freedoms councils in Devolution Deal areas can achieve to support economic and skills development. The Lib Dem members are able to bring a non-devo rural perspective and have been successful in our efforts to include rural economic development, housing provision and economic exclusion into discussions. Our voice is the voice of rural councils, while the Labour members are focused on larger towns and areas with Mayoral models of devo deals, and the conservatives are largely quiet.

Growth and productivity – commissioned work, with the City Regions Board, into Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) produced a resource for councils of good practice. Lib Dems are concerned that LEP functions are being subsumed by higher level authorities at the expense of districts to promote the value of locally based solutions and programmes.

Future Growth Funding has been explored with a clear recommendation to government that funding needs to be longer term, for allocations to be evidence led instead of competitive and one size does not fit all. A cross party view is that central government needs to trust local government, and the value of local knowledge and relationships.

Employment and skills – the board has promoted the Work Local model, providing a practical vision for devolved and integrated employment and skills provision. Funding from government is complex, short term and managed by multiple Whitehall departments. The Work Local model provides an alternative approach, giving democratically elected local

leaders the power and funding to work with partners to join up careers advice and guidance, employment, skills, apprenticeships, business support services and outreach into the community. Lib Dems promote the need for such a simplified approach to be available to all councils within and outside devolution deal areas particularly rural authorities, reflecting local knowledge and different economic conditions.

The Board also highlighted the need for a Green Jobs framework, with Lib Dems championing the development of tools and funding for councils to support food production and the green economy.

Transport and economic inclusion – research commissioned investigating the relationship between availability of and access to public transport and opportunities for skills development and economic activity and inclusion. Unsurprisingly it was found that poor transport links reduce access to growth. Disadvantage in rural areas was found to be exacerbated by poor public transport, while in cities and larger towns barriers to inclusion include cost and concerns for personal safety.

Digital transformation and inclusion – the Board held a digital session at the LGA Annual conference looking at the role of councils and national partners in improving local connectivity, digital skills, using assets and system to support better access to digital services and targeted inclusion programmes.

Concerns about the impact on rural communities of the 2G/3G switch off raised by LDs and other led to a commissioned a survey to understand the impact on the sector, what services most affected and levels of awareness.

Discussions between the LGA's digital champion and government are continuing about the practical outcomes of the Wireless Infrastructure Strategy, particularly on how to establish an agreed way of measuring local mobile coverage data. LDs continue to keep the impact of poor connectivity in rural areas on the Board's agenda.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Liberal Democrat Retained Peers

Councillor Alan Connett



Post election 'change of control' support for Liberal Democrat council groups

The three Retained Member Peers, Councillor Alan Connett, Councillor Lisa Smart and Councillor Sarah Butikofer provide a wide range of support for our council groups and Leaders.

A particularly busy time is the local election period, especially so following the great results in May 2023 and 2024. The Local Government Association (LGA) provides a support programme to each council where there is a 'change of control' including five days of member peer support to the new administration and, for example, mentoring support for colleagues taking up new lead roles. This year, to prepare for 'change of control' set-up two online conference calls for Leaders with elections in May. This helped ensure Group Leaders knew 'what to do and who to contact' if circumstances unexpectedly changed.

Alan, Lisa and Sarah work closely with the LGA Liberal Democrat office and colleagues at ALDC and also to identify councils where there may be a 'change of control'. We then allocate a 'buddy' to be the key link as soon as the results are known. We are grateful each year to the willing volunteers who are 'election buddies.' Our thanks to Joe Harris, Bridget Smith, Lucy Nethsingha, Heather Kidd, Howard Sykes, Richard Kemp, Caroline Leaver, Keith House, Dave Hodgson, Tony Dale, Dave Neighbour, Terry Stacy and Rob Banks.

Supporting Liberal Democrats in Local Government

The team of Retained Member Peers also support our council groups with facilitated 'away-days', training and development opportunities, Peer Mentoring and support for service specific issues. We work with an excellent team of experienced and knowledgeable Liberal Democrat councillors who are the LGA Liberal Democrats 'pool' of Member Peers.

LGA Sector Led Improvement

The LGA invests heavily in member development programmes. The Highlighting Leadership offer is particularly valuable to all councillors and includes the well-regarded Leadership Academy and a wide range of Leadership Essentials focussed events. A good number of the LGA Leadership Essentials course are free and we need more Liberal Democrats to take advantage of the LGA development available.

Peer assignments and mentoring

We welcome applications to become a Member Peer and especially from women, young councillors, and councillors with good experience in planning, adult and children's services, finance, housing and social media. Email ryan.priest@local.gov.uk for an application form. Do it NOW.

Help and support throughout the year

The Retained Member Peers help and support Liberal Democrat Groups on councils in LGA membership. This includes facilitated events for Groups, future-planning for the council, putting that planning into reality, group issues, general advice and arranging mentoring.

Thank you

My thanks to Sarah and Lisa, the Group Office (Terry, Rob and Ryan), all our Member Peers and ALDC for the help and support throughout the year. My thanks also to the LGA Principal Advisors and the Improvement Team for their support.

Contact points

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Cllr Sarah Butikofer E: sarah.butikofer@btinternet.com T: 07968 897235

LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and International Councillor Flo Clucas



As the LGA Liberal Democrat representative to CEMR, I attend the Policy committee and also as finance spokesperson Finance meetings.

CEMR is an organisation composed of EU and non-EU countries. In addition to both of the above I attend meetings which discuss EU initiatives such as changes in financial regulations which also affect non-EU countries.

In March there was a CEMR/UCLG event at which I was asked to present opportunities for Climate action in Housing. For this work done through the Committee of the Regions was able to be cited as was the retrofitting of social housing in Merseyside and work being done in Cheltenham building net zero accommodation.

In May I will be speaking at a meeting in relation to the power of subnational finance and I'm grateful to the LGA for information that it has given in relation to that contribution.

Additionally, I will also be looking at how gender in public finance can change opportunity and life chances for women. This session will focus on the technical support that DG Reform can offer member states in the coming year and even though this is an EU matter, nevertheless the potential for it to influence non-EU countries is significant.

As an LGA representative, I have also been appointed to CEMR Equalities Committee and will be representing the LGA on that standing committee.

I will also be attending the CEMR Policy committee in Brussels on the 17th and 18th of June for which the agenda has not as yet been published.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

District Councils Network

Councillor Bridget Smith



The last Board meeting heard a series of excellent presentations on the State of Local Government Funding

Jonathan Carr-West discussed the findings of LGiU's State of Local Government Finance report, which were far worse than those of the previous year. Fifty-one per cent of councils anticipated issuing a Section 114 notice over

the next five years if nothing changes. Councils were using levers such as increasing council tax, increasing fees and charges, spending reserves and cutting spending on services. The areas most at risk of cuts were on services that every member of the public benefited from. He said there was no consensus on how the finance system could be retained.

David Phillips said the current parliament had not been one of austerity, with spending increases planned. But inflation, the national living wage and population growth had lessened the impact of spending increases. He said that small real-terms increases were planned to overall public spending, meaning that unprotected areas, including local government, faced cuts of 2.4 per cent to 4 per cent. He predicted districts would fare better than most councils if the council tax referendum threshold remained at 3 per cent.

Abdool Kara said the NAO's role was to judge the efficiency and effectiveness of government activity. He said the next government would inherit challenges including the ageing population, stagnant growth, debt, workforce issues exacerbated by Brexit and a lack of productivity in public services.

Board members are calling for **new burdens rules** to be followed on waste reform and the easing of rules that prevent councils from bidding in more than one round of energy efficiency funding. Our questionnaire on the new food waste collection had largest response rate ever for a DCN survey.

The DCN Conference was a success but feedback has noted the need for a larger venue that allows all delegates to stay under the same roof. The Board also noted the need to think about the best way to integrate the contributions of national politicians at next year's conference (these were the least popular sessions).

What is happening next?

DCN is producing forward plans for five key areas of DCN activity:

- regeneration and growth
- health, housing and hardship
- environment and sustainability
- finance and investment
- membership and engagement.

The aim is to have a clear plan of action for each area to help ensure we deliver value for our members and to inject momentum into our activity. It will also allow Chief Executives' Group (CEG), Executive Board and DCN central team to monitor progress across the board, identify any gaps or duplication, join up our lobbying and comms campaigns better and plan our use of resources more effectively.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

County Councils Network

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse



CCN is a cross party grouping of 20 county authorities and 17 County Unitary authorities. The CCN are England's largest grouping of councils, with their 2,600 councillors representing some 26 million people, and covering 86 per cent of the country's landmass. Collectively, they are responsible for 39 per cent of England's GVA, almost half the country's

entire spend on children's and adult social care and maintain 70 per cent of local roads.

The Liberal Democrat group on CCN is now the second largest grouping with us taking control of more councils. Well done those newly elected councillors! We also have new Council Leaders with the Unitary Councils we now control.

The Chief Executive of CCN attends Lib Dem group meetings and briefs the Lib Dem group on emerging issues and updates on specific policy matters. This has allowed time for the Liberal Democrat Group to discuss emerging issues especially around Special Educational Needs and Local Government Funding. A Leaders call is held on a regular basis. The Executive of CCN meetings is attended by me and Stephen Giles Midhurst which progresses the business of CCN such as development of the work programme.

Councillor Stephen Giles Medhurst acts as our deputy leader (Herts) and is also the lead on the Transport and Infrastructure Portfolio. I'm a Vice Chair with a portfolio which has just been introduced on Public Health.

It is great to see new council Liberal Democrat Leaders now joining us. My thanks go to them for taking on the roles they have for the party and I do think as a party we tend to forget the massive work we do around services for our elderly and children, can I thank also the Lib Dem councillors who

joined in with CCN making it all worthwhile. All CCN council meetings are held by Microsoft teams except for the CCN conference held in November which an in-person event.

CCN has been developing reports over the year as it works with key partners who are well respected. The biggest area has been SEND, Adult Social Care and the funding issues for County and Unitary Councils. The latest reports can be found on the CCN website² with increasing focus on Unitary issues with the latest on housing.

CCN has been developing the county and unitary manifesto for the General Election. It has worked with the LGA and Political Parties. My thanks go to Helen Morgan MP who attended and spoke at the CCN Conference, she is also regarded well by the CCN team as someone that understands the pressures of Counties.

The business plan for 2023 /2024 can be found online at CCN Business Plan 2023-24³

Facebook page (closed group you need to ask to join)⁵

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2. <https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/advocacy/publications-research-consultations/>

3. <https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk>

4. www.facebook.com/groups/ccnlibdems/

LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Federal Party Coordinator

Councillor Chris White



Most ALDC/LGA sponsored motions at autumn conference were successful, but the debate on housing ended in tears, with a policy which is still challenging on the ground. Some speakers in support of the removal of blanket targets did us few favours. I have, with Terry and Tim, reached out to the Young Liberals to see how we can in future see off problems of this nature.

There is a feeling that there should be a constitutional amendment ending the anomaly under which the councillor family has no direct representation on Federal Conference Committee, not least because Young Liberals was granted representation at autumn conference.

In January the Federal Board looked at **'strategic priorities'**:

Membership: we need to serve membership better. This includes thinking about how to turn members into activists while accepting that some want just to be supporters.

Campaigning: concerns about Mid Beds were raised, in particular that by-election campaigns were inconsistent: excellent techniques in one did not necessarily appear in the next one.

Diversity: there was still much more to be done.

'One party': there was a discussion about how non-target GE seats should be handled and how they can fit in with the overall targeted campaign.

Messaging: 'a fair deal' is emerging as a core script. Polling has shown that this is effective. It needs to find its way into literature templates.

More recently we have looked at the danger that a General Election might clash with an autumn conference. This led to an inconclusive members' consultation and a final decision by Federal Board on 20 May, but events moved on with the July General Election date.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Local Partnerships and Audit Committee

Councillor Howard Sykes MBE



Local Partnerships is an in-house consultancy jointly owned by the Local Government Association, HM Treasury, and the Welsh Government.

We work solely for Councils and Combined Authorities, Central Government Departments and the Welsh Government.

I have been the LGA Liberal Democrat Group representative since August 2021. The Board met in May, July, October (Board meeting and Strategy Day), December 2023, and February (Board Governance and Training Day) and March 2024.

The Board is comprised of members from all the above 'owners' and working first hand with civil servants from the Treasury and Welsh Government is a unique experience and gives a real insight into how Government works and what is important to them.

Local Partnerships delivers value and efficiency for the public purse. As a key interface between local and central government, we provide expert advice and practical resources alongside project and programme delivery support, enabling public services to thrive.

Whether supporting and accelerating the delivery of major infrastructure, tackling climate challenges through waste efficiency and renewable energy propositions through to wider place-making initiatives, we help transform services across the public sector ecosystem.

We seek to share our intellectual capital freely for the benefit of the whole public sector and issue regular guidance and dissemination of best practice.

Examples include the CEO Blueprint, the Greenhouse Gas Accounting Tool, Local Authority Company Review Guidance and the Temporary Accommodation Toolkit all freely available to the public sector on the Local Partnerships website⁵.

We produce an annual impact report, located on the front page of our website, which details the successes we have helped our clients achieve. I recommend you take 10 mins and have a read – it will not be time wasted!

In October 2023 we welcomed Leon Wong to the Board as the Welsh Government representative, replacing Steve Davies who left at the same point. In May 2023, Claire Holloway resigned as Company Secretary and was replaced by Teresa Oliviere. Faith Quigley and Will Davies, both HM Treasury nominees, were appointed in March 2024.

Local Partnerships' Chief Executive Adele Gritten joined the organisation on 1 November 2022. She brings a wealth of professional services leadership experience and has demonstrated her ambition for Local Partnerships to grow to offer greater assistance to the sector, in key areas where senior capacity and capability is in short supply. To support that aim, we have reorganised teams into three business units: Climate, Commercial and Place, and recruited additional staff members. We are thus well-placed to deliver against our strategic goal to help strengthen the public sector.

We welcome the opportunity to talk to councillors and councils to see how we can help deliver your priorities. The calibre of staff carrying out this important work to support authorities across England and Wales is second to none and I have great pleasure in recommending Local Partnerships to you.

For further information please visit Local Partnerships⁶ or for an informal discussion, do drop me an email or give me a call. I look forward to hearing from you.

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5. <https://localpartnerships.gov.uk/>

6. <https://localpartnerships.gov.uk/>

LEAD MEMBER REPORT

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC)

Councillor Howard Sykes MBE



I was re-appointed to the Committee after the group elections in July 2023.

This year it has met four times, June 23, July 23, November 23, and March 24. The next meeting was scheduled for 3 June 24. All meetings have been held via Teams and attendance has been good. Mine is 100 per cent. The committee is all new, apart from me this year: Rob Alden

(Chair and Con) is from Birmingham City Council, Kate Groucutt is from St. Helens Council (Lab) and Cllr Anne Dale is from Northumberland County Council (Indy).

Induction is now covered by one of the Governance recommendations so after more than two plus years this issue is being addressed and did happen – with short notice - earlier this year on the LGA induction day.

Some of the issues covered during the year include:

- Review of updated Terms of Reference.
- Audit and Risk Committee work programme.
- Internal Audit Programme.
- Finance report, including half-year results and latest forecast.
- Anti-fraud, bribery and corruption update.
- Performance report 22/23: quarterly monitoring: July – Sept.
- Members complaints.
- Summary of ARAC findings to be reported to LGA Board.

There was robust challenge, debate on all matters and nothing that needs reporting (by exception) apart from one matter.

The only exception in for me was that we had caught a member of staff defrauding the travel expenses (over a period of time). All appropriate actions and changes to processes have been taken (the staff member have been dismissed) and some staff training issues need to be addressed.

Colleagues may also recall that, when I was first appointed, I challenged whether the previous practice of only two meetings a year was sufficient to fully discharge our proper responsibilities.

As a result, it was agreed that performance and financial reports would now be shared with the Committee every quarter. Also, the Audit Governance Review recommended more meetings and regular reports on several key issues. It is nice that they agreed with me, and this has been actioned.

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LEAD MEMBER REPORT

LGA Commercial Advisory Board

Councillor David Neighbour



The Commercial Advisory Board is a working group of the LGA Executive, tasked with both monitoring and evaluating the LGA's commercial activity as well as recommending action on its future commercial undertakings. The Board meets four times a year.

Our work this year has included the monitoring of the management of the contract with JA Kemp at the former IDEA site at Layden House, Farringdon. This has included the preparation for the letting of the two retail outlets on the ground floor. The LGA's other rental property is 18 Smith Square, where two of the floors are for commercial rent as well as renting desk space to other Public Sector organisations such as the County Council Network, District Council Network and the National Association of Local Councils.

This year we are conducting a review into the LGA funding model. Since the Board was set up, the LGA has continued to hold the price of Council Subscription income to roughly 15 per cent of our requirements. At the same time money from central grants has reduced from roughly 80 per cent to 65 per cent of income. The money from commercial activity, including rental space has grown from just over five per cent to nearly 20 per cent in the last decade. We are holding a workshop to look at the existing sources of income and the potential threat to them, as well as exploring other opportunities. We will also look at how we reach an optimal mix of sources of income for the future.

The Board also receives reports on activity within the LGA's joint ventures. These include; GEOPLACE (with Ordnance Survey), the UK Municipal Bonds Agency (partnering with 56 Councils) and Local Partnerships (with HM Treasury, the Welsh Government).

The activities we oversee allow the LGA to both control the cost of Member Council subscriptions and to provide the revenue streams which will support future core work throughout the organisation.

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The LGA Liberal Democrat Group Office

The Liberal Democrat Group office provides direct support and advice to Liberal Democrat council groups and councillors whilst also acting as the day-to-day voice of the Liberal Democrats within the LGA.

We currently have three full-time members of staff. Terry Stacy, the Head of Office, Rob Banks, Political Advisor, and Ryan Priest, Political Assistant. Rob and Terry both have experience as Liberal Democrat Councillors and Ryan is currently a Liberal Democrat Councillor on Dudley Council.

We help the Group to achieve its political objectives within the LGA and the party, working closely with LGA officers, Liberal Democrat HQ, our parliamentarians in both the House of Commons and House of Lords and with our colleagues at the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors with whom we organise joint events as well as sessions and fringes at both spring and autumn party conferences.

In addition to supporting the LGA Liberal Democrat Group we are also the first port of call for Liberal Democrat councillors in relation to a variety of policy, governance or legal issues. We do weekly joint emails with ALDC to all councillors and ALDC members on a range of issues, news from the Liberal Democrats, local government news, good practice from council groups and councillors, highlight lobbying successes and details of events for councillors and campaigners.

We also use Twitter; follow us on @libdemlocalgov and on Instagram at LGA LibDems.

The LGA Liberal Democrat Group Office



Terry Stacy MBE

Head of the Group Office

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Terry is responsible for the operation of the LGA Liberal Democrat Group. He also provides specific support on housing, welfare local government finance, Cities and Urban regeneration and fire.



Rob Banks

Political Adviser

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Rob provides support for: Environment; Economy and Transport; Community Wellbeing including Adult Social Care; People and Places; and Safer Communities and Rob supports the regular council leader calls.



Ryan Priest

Political Assistant

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Ryan provides support for Children and Young People and supports the regular Opposition Leader calls, in addition to Local Government Improvement and peer support work.

Yet more Liberal Democrat seat gains included Milton Keynes, Portsmouth – where we retained minority control – and Dudley where we now hold the balance of power.







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