

Daring to be different

Annual Report 2019/20



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Group Executive Summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to sweep across our world, our councillors across England and Wales have done incredible work assisting those in need, advising and leading in our councils and in our communities. This annual report, published in November 2020, focuses on our achievements of 2019/20, including the start of the lockdown from 24 March.

Our councils and communities have faced unparalleled challenges and our councillors have stepped up to provide local leadership, support and assurance when central government has struggled. It is therefore no wonder that local government remains the most trusted.

Thanks to all our members, council and LGA officers, colleagues and supporters who have gone above and beyond in their efforts to support residents in exceptional circumstances.

The work of the LGA is to support our members, elected councillors, and to lobby on their behalf to listen and to influence government to improve funding and legislation for our councils, enabling them to better serve our residents.

You will find in this report how we increased our membership, lobbied successfully for council funding, directly influenced local, national and international policy and supported our members to adjust to the new ways of working and new priorities in this changed world.

This Annual Report provides reports from our Group's leadership, peers, board and committee representatives, outlining our achievements over the last year.

Through the LGA Independent Group, members from across England and Wales stand for what they believe in and work together to be a positive voice for their residents and for local government. Despite the challenges 2020 has held, we look back at 2019 as the year our group grew by over 600 members to the largest we've ever been.



Our impact has never been greater as we lead more councils and demonstrate what Independent Leadership looks like, and it is impressive, well-focused on the best outcomes for residents.

Thank you to my Deputy Leader, Cllr Clive Woodbridge, and elected Treasurer, Cllr Paul Woodhead and to the Executive for their excellent support. 2019/20 was a busy year rising to new challenges and 2020/21 promises to need all our talent and skills to work with residents to keep them safe, financially viable and in healthy communities, at the same time as turning the tide on the environment, towards improvement.



Leader of the LGA Independent Group Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

Vice-Chairman of the Local Government Association
Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven
District Council

Group Leader's year in review

May 2019 saw our group members outstanding in hugely successful local elections. We increased our membership by 622 councillors, at the expense of the big two parties, taking us to over 2,700 members across England and Wales.

Over the last year, more than 30 councils have had an Local Government Association (LGA) Independent Group Leader, with a further 30 plus councils with Independents and Greens in the Administration. This has been a challenging year for all of us but especially those members who found themselves newly leading authorities that, in many cases, had been one-party states for too long.

With a powerful mandate based on greater transparency, people before politics, and challenge to stilted local plans; members have taken control with confidence and gusto.

With success at the ballot box came greater representation across the LGA with two places on each board. We have a powerful top team of members, working with our officers, think tanks and Executive to deliver the impact you will read about in this report.

Our successes

2019/20 was an extremely busy and successful year for the Independent Group at the LGA but a challenging one for our councils, even before the coronavirus pandemic. We face a climate emergency, care crisis, ongoing financial challenges, housing and planning pressures and uncertainty around the type of Brexit arrangements we will be working with.

In July 2019 the LGA passed a motion in support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Councils across the country, led by members of our group, declared climate emergencies in their hundreds.

That same month we also found ourselves with a new Prime Minister, keen to ‘build, build, build’; reshape Whitehall and support business. With a significant funding gap after years of underfunding, we were quick to write to the new PM and Chancellor, to make the case for local government. Our efforts were heard and the government announced the biggest year on year real terms increase in spending power for local government in a decade. Sadly, none of us were to know the impact coronavirus would have on our finances, and in that regard we have yet to have our costs and lost income fully recovered.

We have, therefore, found ourselves fighting on multiple fronts as the government focused on building houses and its ‘levelling up’ agenda, which is why we have continued holding regional meetings and policy seminars for our members on the key issues we face. We have also delivered development opportunities, promoted our Be a Councillor campaign; held our biggest annual group conference; and held our first annual Climate Change Conference.

As well as supporting members to attend the LGA’s Leader’s Programme and Leadership Academy, we held our sixth Next Generation programme, bringing together a cohort that continue to support each other and contribute to our think tanks with rigour.

Our board representatives have again been extremely effective, leading negotiations with government departments, influencing key legislation and consultations like the Resources and Waste Strategy, sitting on outside bodies, working for fairer funding and bringing forward essential changes around fire and building safety, to name a few.

The Independent Group is a powerful force in the LGA and your ongoing contributions are influencing positive change locally, nationally and on the international stage. It is inspiring to read through this report and see just what our group has achieved.

Thank you

Thank you to my Deputy, Clive Woodbridge, Treasurer Paul Woodhead and Executive members who represent our regions and drive forward our activity each year.

Thank you to our peers and lead members for your commitment and hard work on top of challenging local demands.

I thank them for their outstanding work bringing well-grounded common sense and talent to the work of the LGA.

To our council leaders, deputy leaders and portfolio holders, you are doing a tremendous job in unique circumstances. Thank you for your diligence, challenge and wisdom as we work nationally together to inform and influence Government on multiple fronts.

Thank you to Sarah Woodhouse, Noleen Rosen and Aimee Wittam-Smith in the group office.

And to all of our councillors, thank you. You do a fantastic job for our communities – this year being an exceptional example of how much we all do on behalf of our residents, our communities, our councils and country.

Through the LGA we work together, focused on the things that unite us, and have a powerful voice for good.

I wish you every success through this most challenging of years.





LGA Independent Group Budget Report Councillor Paul Woodhead

Cannock Chase District Council
Elected Group Treasurer

In my first report as Group Treasurer I wanted to thank colleagues for their support and the Executive Committee for their ongoing commitment to the Group's activity.

As you will read in this report, 2019/20 was a busy year for all of us in our councils and at the LGA, where we increased our regional activity, developed new resources for members and continued delivering the high quality support we all value.

Our budget for 2019/20 was £23,310, this slight increase on the year before reflecting internal charges for room hire and conference charges at 18 Smith Square, forecast at the beginning of the year.

As in previous years our budget was used effectively to fund the activity of the group including our regional meetings, workshops, annual conference, LGA conference activity and printing costs. Our Be a Councillor and Next Generation Programmes continue to be funded via separate grant monies from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

We ended the year showing a £2939 overspend, but this is due to an accrual error with the actual overspend of £418.23 being previously agreed to cover some temporary office support.

In 2020/21 our budget is £25,227. At the end of 2019/20 we had forecast to spend this in its entirety on more regional events and conferences, group elections and publications. Given the impact of coronavirus our plans have changed and we find ourselves working more remotely, thus reducing costs.

I continue to work closely with the Head of Group Office and the Executive Committee to provide financial oversight in this atypical year.





An update from our lead member peers

Councillor Mike Haines

Teignbridge District Council
National Lead Member Peer

Independent Group peers have continued to give support and advice to our members across England and Wales. This year we have eight regional lead peers:

Councillor Mike Haines

Independent Group National Lead Peer, and
Regional Peer: South West

Councillor Paul Cullen

Regional Lead Peer: North East and Yorkshire and Humberside

Councillor Andrew Cooper

Regional Lead Peer: Green members

Councillor Goronwy Edwards

Regional Lead Peer: Independent members in Wales

Councillor Colin Mann

Regional Lead Peer: Wales

Councillor Alan Seldon

Regional Lead Peer: West Midlands and North West

Councillor Linda Van de Hende

Regional Lead Peer: South East and London

Councillor Ron Woodley

Regional Lead Peer: East England and East Midlands

At a regional level our work has included providing support for lone members; helping to resolve ongoing disagreements; advice to Group members where there has been a change of control (this has seen an increase since the elections in May 2019 which produced more Independent Group councillors in administration at their councils); leadership support and mentoring; advice on policy issues and advice on protocols. There have also been peer meetings as part of the LGA's sector improvement discussions, although coronavirus has disrupted this. Our peers have also attended various development days along with the LGA's peer conference in November 2019 at Milton Keynes.

In addition to our Regional Peers, we have a strong pool of 36 Member Peers who have supported councillors in various ways. This year peers have undertaken seven Corporate Peer Challenges, one planning policy and planning application; one strategic care and health peer challenge; CPC focussing on Digital and one CPC follow up. The team have provided one to one mentoring support and advice in areas including budget setting, social care and regeneration, as well as co-facilitating workshops on issues such as prevention and health, digital and communications, scrutiny and chairing skills, cabinet sessions, adult social care and health scrutiny, children's services, planning, finance and new councillor inductions.



Next Generation

I helped facilitate the Independent Group's sixth 'Next Generation' programme for future leaders. This involved three weekend residential modules in Warwick attended by 18 councillors, the largest cohort we have ever had. The feedback from this was once again encouraging, and it is good to see many former participants go on to leadership roles within their councils and at the LGA.

Corporate Peer Challenges

One of the key benefits of LGA membership continues to be the sector-led support on offer, including the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). I would encourage all councillors to check whether their council has had a CPC in the last five years and if not, request one via your Leader or Chief Executive.

Looking forward

We are always keen to do more, and we continue to receive many requests for peer support, via the Group and the LGA more widely. I am writing this report during the Coronavirus lockdown, with uncertainty as to how things will gradually get back to 'normal' over the coming months. With no local elections this May, and many councils not holding Annual meetings we are in a situation beyond our previous experience as councillors. We are continuing to support councillors during this time, and look forward to working more closely with you (without the need for social distancing) in the future.

If you are interested in receiving support from any of our member peers or would like to become a peer, please contact: Sarah Woodhouse, Head of the Group Office.



LGA Fire Services Management Committee

Councillor Ian Stephens

Isle of Wight

Chair, LGA Fire Services Management Committee

Back in October 2019, at our first meeting of the new cycle we set our priorities for the coming year, little knowing that all our worlds were to be turned upside down in a matter of months by a global pandemic. But prior to that, 2019/20 was a hugely significant, not to say challenging, year for Fire and Rescue Services (FRS).

Firstly, in October the phase one report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry was published with a raft of wide-ranging recommendations for Fire and Rescue Services to respond to. We held a special Fire Commission session in January this year to discuss its implications and to plot a way forward.

Shortly after this, the Secretary of State Robert Jenrick, made a statement promising 'the biggest change in building safety for a generation' and launched a new Fire Safety Bill. The statement represented success for the Committee's lobbying on a number of issues, notably the move towards a risk-based approach to regulation rather than height-based and the requirements around sprinklers in new buildings, which the FSMC has supported for several years.

The HMICFRS State of Fire report published in January was another big moment for FRS's, with four key recommendations for reform and FSMC Lead Members have been working closely with the National Fire Chiefs Council to respond to these. Our workforce team are working jointly with the NFCC on producing a Code of Ethics for FRS's and to consider the feasibility of alternative pay negotiation arrangements. Behind the scenes we are working on the issues identified by the inspectorate to optimise the relationship between senior officers and fire authority members, while retaining the current clear democratic accountability of FRAs.

One area where HMICFRS was highly critical of FRS's was around diversity and inclusion. We therefore set up the Diversity and Inclusion Champions Network in late 2019 and its inaugural meeting took place on the 22 January 2020. This is an area I feel very strongly about – as HMICFRS found, it is too often seen as just a 'tick box' exercise but, in my view, in order to function effectively and efficiently, FRS's must be fully inclusive, properly reflect the communities they serve and recognise, support and celebrate diversity

Another policy area with massive implications for FRS's is climate change and so FSMC commissioned a report looking at the role of the Fire and Rescue Service nationally in both helping tackle the effects of a changing climate, such as increased wild fires and floods, and also in reducing its own carbon footprint. This was published at the LGA Fire Conference in Blackpool in March.

I can't finish my update without mentioning the impact that COVID-19 had on our work. Fortunately, the lockdown happened shortly after our highly successful Blackpool conference but subsequent to that, the focus of our work has quite rightly shifted to helping FRA's and councils respond. As a result of the continuing uncertainty, Lead Members decided not to set a concrete work plan for 2020/21 so we are able to remain flexible and respond to situations as and when they arise.



Children and Young People Board Councillor Julie Fallon

Conwy County Borough Council
Deputy Chair, Children and Young People Board

In my first year as Deputy Chair, the priorities of the Children and Young People Board have been wide ranging. Our activity has focused on issues relating to SEND, mental health, schools, children in care, children's health, funding, youth provision, young carers, children's tooth decay, home to school transport, adoption and fostering.

During 2019/20 we have responded to consultations, lobbied government and continued building relationships with key stakeholders. Cllr Judy Jennings and I have represented our members at five Board meetings. We also had the National Children and Adult Services Conference (NCASC), which was attended by nearly 850 attendees, despite the impact of the impending general election; the LGA's Annual Public Health Conference and conference on childhood obesity.

The Board launched a range of new publications and reports including new research showing that schools which remain under council control are more likely to keep a good or outstanding Ofsted rating. As part of the #CouncilsCan campaign we called for councils to be given powers to intervene and improve all school types found to be inadequate.

We published an updated paper on our Bright Futures Work, focusing particularly on the need for greater and sustainable funding, early intervention and a child-centric approach to policy making.

We also launched a report into the findings from the LGA's peer programme into improving children and young people's mental health; health visiting good practice; and a publication with Public

health England on supporting young parents to reach their full potential.

In regards to member support, we updated the resource packs on Corporate Parenting and Support for Care Leavers; published a guide for new lead members for children services and a pack for all councillors looking at early intervention.

Members and Officers have briefed Ministers throughout the year ahead of parliamentary debates on education funding, free schools, youth services and unregulated accommodation. We submitted evidence to the Justice Committee's inquiry into children and young people in custody and welcomed a new Minister, ensuring she was aware of the vast amounts of work our councils do to support and nurture future generations.

We welcomed £700m in additional funding for council high needs budgets but the system remains under significant pressure.

Since March 2020 the board's priorities have adjusted to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, particularly the safety of vulnerable children and families and the safe re-opening of schools. The lead members and I had regular informal meetings with officers to discuss the latest picture across the country and the best approach to take.

I would like to thank Judy and the officers supporting the board for their work through 2019/20. It was a very informative first year in post and 2020/21 has proved to be even busier but remarkable given everything our authorities juggle and deliver in often challenging circumstances.



City Regions Board Councillor Gillian Ford

London Borough of Havering
Deputy Chair, City Regions Board

Last September's first City Regions Board meeting of the year, seems but a distant memory with all that has taken place since then with elections, Brexit, Exit and COVID-19.

The board has had devolution and the development of a Devolution Framework as a core issue. Board members have increased their efforts on empowering councils as leaders of place by engaging individual Departments on devolving powers and funding, for example on skills and employment or through Local Industrial Strategies. This was reinforced in the LGA conference publication 'Councils Can'. Consideration has also been given to the relationship between national government, local government and communities following the UK's departure from the EU.

There has been a continued focus on seeking to ensure the key elements of Government's national economic strategy – Local Industrial Strategies, UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the LEP Review, fit with the priorities and ambitions of urban authorities and that councils are well placed to support sustainable and inclusive growth. This would include continuing our sector-led improvement offer to councils on their work with LEPs to develop and influence local economic strategies.

Lobbying continued around the LGA's work on skills and employment, building on our well established Work Local policy to develop a plan for its practical implementation and continued engagement in relation to youth participation and lifelong learning.

Scoping work on the role of urban authorities in tackling climate change, was undertaken within the context of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals which fed into the LGA's overall activity following its declaration of a climate emergency.

A number of research studies and presentations were received throughout the year including: work on Urban Cost Pressures and the specific variances that may exist between urban and rural settings, IPPR North Report 'Devolving Power to England's Regions, Towns and Cities', Employment and Skills – including funding and Local Authority engagement, Stronger Towns Fund and regular updates on Brexit which morphed into the UK Exit strategy. This work included an update on the development of Freeports.

Discussions around the governments proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Growth Funding have continued throughout the year but it is fair to say that COVID-19 has had and will have a long-term financial impact on all local authorities going forward.





Community Wellbeing Board Cllr Claire Wright

Devon County Council
Deputy Chair, Community Wellbeing Board

It's been a very busy year for the Board, with the main focus throughout on how to resolve the urgent crisis in adult social care funding.

I was very sorry to lose my Independent colleague, Kate Allsopp in May, but was pleased to be joined by new colleagues, Cllrs Neil Burdon and David Beaman.

Following ongoing and significant budget cuts to adult social care services since 2010 the service has increasingly shifted into crisis.

As councillors we see the evidence of these devastating budget cuts in our work frequently, with people who cannot get their relatives into a care home, who are not able to find adequate paid care or day care, because of government funding cuts.

Unpaid carers are frequently having to pick up the pieces and their lives are often intolerably difficult, with their physical and mental health suffering with the demands on them. Some people too, have been forced to quit their jobs and their finances have suffered as a result.

So, given my own first-hand experiences with impacts of these cuts I have been so impressed to see the positive and significant efforts made by LGA officers and members associated with the CWB on moving matters forward with ministers in a positive way.

I was particularly impressed with the follow-up documentation to the LGA's own thought provoking green paper, which was produced after a long wait for the government version, which has still not emerged.

A series of well researched and well evidenced LGA officer reports with fully costed proposals, illustrated with many moving case studies have been circulated to a wide range of stakeholders, health ministers and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Mr Hancock attended two of our meetings in the past year and was pressed hard on the urgent social care funding situation, by members keen to see the situation resolved.

Towards the end of 2019 and at the January 2020 meeting, there did seem to have been some real progress made on the adult social funding situation. We were hopeful that a resolution may not be far away.

But due to COVID-19 the situation has been put on hold for now.

A vast amount of work was started in March this year by LGA officers, who are doing everything they can to support councils at this very difficult time.

I am once again, hugely impressed with the level and quality of work being produced and with the excellent ongoing research that will help the country navigate its way through a probable second wave of coronavirus. I congratulate officers and chair, Ian Hudspeth for the excellent work they are doing on this.



Culture, Tourism and Sport Councillor Julian German

Cornwall County Council
Vice Chair, Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

It has been a busy and challenging year for all of us. The strength of our communities has come through in tackling the pandemic and our arts and culture and sport are strong elements of what bind us together, give us space for constructive debate and actions, and are required for the positive socio-economic impacts and health and well-being of our communities.

Tourism too is facing a challenging time, whilst I have been pleased that we have done good work regarding the importance of culture and sport to all year round high value tourism I have been frustrated by the Boards inability to draw the work on a 'tourism tax' to a close.

The areas covered by this Board are fundamentally important to our communities but for the greater part are non-statutory. The challenge for the coming year will be continuing to make the case for investment when the impacts of corona virus and ongoing austerity mean that there will be more really tough decisions ahead.

Conferences

At the 2019 LGA annual conference, the board launched two publications: 'Making the most of your museums' and 'Supplying skills for the visitor economy'.

I chaired over 50 delegates at an event focused on Unlocking the cultural and creative potential of rural England. The conference featured presentations from Cornwall, South Lakeland, the Rural Touring Forum, Arts Council England and the National Forest.

The annual LGA Culture and Tourism Conference was held in Portsmouth and was very well attended. Sessions included discussion on Black Cultural Archives, how the arts and heritage can bring us together and High Street Heritage Action Zones.

Sector- Led Improvement

The team have held multiple Sports and Physical Activities Leadership Essential events for officers, delivered in partnership with Sports England. We've also finalised the Leadership Essentials offer for Culture in partnership with the Arts Council and successfully delivered a further five library peer challenges. All received positive feedback from the participating councils.

We also launched our new 'Cultural strategy in a box' supporting members to develop a strategic approach to culture in their areas, which is key to unlocking funding from Arts Council England and other funders.

Tourism

The Board launched its research on supplying skills for the visitor economy. The report explores how a practical application of Work Local principles could work for the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Discussions have continued on the tourism levy and potential operational models for such a levy. LGA-commissioned research found that a pound-per-night levy applied in a local area in England could raise between £238,000 and over £7 million a year depending on the area. Public polling for the LGA found that 53 per cent of those surveyed think their council should be able to charge tourists a small fee to help fund local services that support tourism in their area.

Resources

The board launched the museums handbook, produced with Arts Council England in response to the Mendoza review, it provides guidance and case studies to local authorities responsible for running museums, including best practice and possible delivery models.

We also launched our culture-led regeneration report and have used it to lobby and influence partner organisations, including the House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities

Supporting partners

As well as marking the National Lottery's 25 Year Anniversary, the LGA responded to Arts Council England's 10-Year Strategy which recognises that councils are uniquely placed to build on community strengths. This is a significant shift in thinking compared to ACE's previous strategy and will enhance our work together.

The board supported concerns raised by the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) in response to Historic England's 'Mineral Extraction and Archaeology' draft practice guide.

The board is also supporting the FA's campaign to transform grassroots football.

Creative industries

Members of the board held a roundtable between councils and various creative industries associations, including gaming, theatre, heritage, and fashion representatives as part of our research into the levers councils can use to support the creative industries, as one of the fastest growing parts of the economy. The discussion covered skills reform, planning and regeneration, and shared lobbying messages to central government.





Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board

Councillor Linda Gillham

Runnymede Borough Council

Deputy Chair, Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board

Prior to March 2020 this board devoted much of its time considering climate change and the differing responses from councils. Many have declared Climate Emergencies and yet these have had a variety of meanings in both policy and practice. In January the LGA held an over subscribed conference which discussed the issue of Climate Change in great detail. It was an excellent opportunity to share best practice and indeed ideas which could be disseminated around the country.

This topic has also elicited a regular and fruitful discussion among those members of the Independent Group think tank and I am grateful to all contributors who have helped me raise relevant points at the board meetings.

At the board meetings we have had presentations and follow up discussions on electric vehicles and the provisions councils need to consider in terms of charging points and especially the implications for allocating spaces on public roads which might deprive the council of parking revenue.

Another piece of work that has dominated Board meetings has been the Environment Bill and the consultations on how waste should be collected and recycling, sorted. There is agreement that the current system is often confusing to residents, but as local authorities have long term contracts and indeed many bins and boxes are difficult to accommodate in many types of housing there are clearly differing views on the way forward. The areas of most discussion were garden waste which is often chargeable and the introduction of weekly food waste collections.

Housing and planning are important parts of this boards work and we have discussed the perception that development is held up by local authorities at the planning permission stage and the need to move responsibility to developers as there are many sites with permission that are not being built out. Sir Oliver Letwin addressed the board and gave us feedback on his report into this problem.

There is also a need to consider when major infrastructure is built as larger developments often require new roads and other amenities to be built before the housing.

The board has monitored the Grenfell inquiry and the subsequent issues for all buildings with cladding. They have made representations on homelessness, flooding and the funding of flood relief schemes and of course air quality.

A busy year with a wide spectrum of local authority responsibilities and opportunities to lobby Government. Please keep sending you ideas and responses to the think tank.





Improvement and Innovation Board Councillor Neil Prior

Pembrokeshire County Council
Deputy Chair, Improvement and Innovation Board

I became a deputy chair for the Improvement and Innovation Board in September 2019 as the efficiency and productivity portfolio lead member. This covers a wide range of areas, broadly categorised under procurement, innovation, and digital and data, with the intention to help councils save money, generate income, and innovate.

In the short time I've had working with the efficiency and productivity team, I've been hugely impressed by their knowledge, professionalism, enthusiasm and commitment to local government. The effort that they put in to support councils across England and Wales, also working closely with the WLGA, is quite staggering, and some of the highlights over the last year include:

Supporting councils to increase savings and income generation. During 2019/20 the productivity and income generation experts have worked with 43 councils contributing towards efficiency savings and/or income generation of £38.5 million, whilst the Shared Services Map update evidenced £1.34 billion of cumulative efficiency savings from 626 partnerships. There was also a push on commercial skills masterclasses with 78 councillors attending and commercial skills training for officers, with 50 attending.

Supporting effective local government procurement. We supported the National Social Value Conference, which had more than 800 people attending over two days. In addition, the team has provided input into the development of reporting measures (the National Themes Outcomes and Measures or TOMs) for social value relating to climate change and more recently COVID-19.

Supporting local government innovation. In 2019/20, 16 councils were selected for the Design in the Public Sector programme. Delivered in partnership with the Design Council, the programme equips councils with design skills and techniques to apply to their toughest service challenges. Working with Behavioural Insights experts, we've supported 34 councils on a range of projects and awarded funding to councils on a range of areas including sustainable travel, public health and financial management.

Providing local government with benchmarking data and information via LG Inform, our online data and benchmarking service, which provides all councils access to performance data for their area, and we ran a number of training events that over 300 attended. A programme of support was also established and delivered to support councils around use of better data, including masterclasses on data and digital transformation.

Supporting the safe use of digital tools, data and systems through the Cabinet Office funded Cyber Security programme, which included supporting the response and recovery of a Borough Council after they were the victim of a major ransomware incident.

And of course, the team is also leading and developing offers to support councils to develop strategies to address climate change. You can read the full board report on Sector Led Improvement [here](#).

It's a real privilege to represent the Independent group on the board, and of personal importance to me that I make active contributions to all aspects of the board's work, and lead by example. I'm therefore happy to report that I've been actively involved as a peer, working with five councils in the last 12 months, I've contributed to the digital and data masterclass, chaired a session at the social value conference, and have led the first LGA/WLGA corporate peer challenge in Wales in my own council. The board has an incredibly important role in supporting local government, and I look forward to reporting more excellent progress next year.



People and Places Board Councillor Robert Jennings

Epping Forest District Council
Deputy Chair, People and Places Board

The People and Places Board represents the interests of the LGA's non-metropolitan local authorities in England and Wales. At its last meeting of the 2018-19 political cycle in June, the Board received its End of Year report, which considered its achievements, which included:

- progressing its work on rural digital connectivity by responding to consultations from both Government and Ofcom
- making the case for parity for those non-metropolitan areas that had not been afforded the same freedoms as areas with a devolution deal
- contributing to the LGA's 'Work Local' proposals, with the Board Chairman speaking at two events as part of the independent Skills Commission's 'Future of the Skills System' inquiry
- supporting the development of Local Industrial Strategies across non-metropolitan England with input into the design of the LGA's Local Industrial Strategy Improvement Offer; and
- surveying the LGA's membership to highlight the depth and diversity of trade and other international links between councils and global partners with a view to strengthening the role of sub-national government and future trade and investment activity.

At the LGA's Annual Conference in July, the Board presented the final report of the Post-Brexit England Commission entitled 'The Future of non-metropolitan England – The freedom to lead local places', which focused on the current and future challenges faced by non-metropolitan England. Later in the month the Commission's report was presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Reform, Decentralization and Devolution in the United Kingdom.

At its first meeting of the new political year in September, the Board agreed to take forward the recommendations of the Post-Brexit England Commission by:

- examining the role of councils in rural land management following the end of the Common Agricultural Policy
- influencing the Government's devolution framework to include the formulation of legislation following the UK's departure from the EU
- ensuring key elements of the Government's economic strategy (Local Industrial Strategies, UK Shared Prosperity Fund and LEP Review) reflect the ambitions of non-metropolitan authorities and that councils are well placed to support sustainable and inclusive growth
- taking forward the LGA's lobbying work on skills and employment whilst developing the Board's ambitions for youth participation and lifelong learning
- examining councils' role in the future of rural land management; and
- keeping a watching brief on broadband and developing its work on mobile connectivity.

To this end, the board commissioned two distinct pieces of work in January. They first asked Localis to examine international examples of devolved growth funding, fiscal devolution and the interaction between them to inform the board's position on fiscal devolution. The second asked Shared Intelligence to explore the opportunities, challenges and future direction of collaboration between district and county councils.

It's also been a busy year on the Parliamentary front, with the Board responding to a number of consultations and inquiries, namely:

- Public Accounts Select Committee's inquiry into local enterprise partnerships
- the refresh of the LGA's 'Work Local – moving the conversation on'

- Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into rural broadband and digital only services
- Treasury Select Committee's inquiry into regional imbalances in the UK economy
- Housing, Communities and Local Government's inquiry into the progress of devolution; and
- Government's consultation on the proposed reforms to permitted development rights to support the deployment of 5G and extend mobile coverage.

Finally, I'd like to thank Councillor Helen Grant (North Yorkshire County Council) for her contribution as a board member and her work on the Digital Connectivity Working Group. I would also like to thank Think Tank members for their contributions and of course the Independent Group office.



Resources Board

Councillor Jason Zadrozny

Ashfield District Council and Nottinghamshire
County Council
Deputy Chair, Resources Board

Councillor Phelim Mac Cafferty and I represent the Independent Group on the Resources Board. 2019/20 was a busy year, at the end of which we'd only just started to consider the impending impact of COVID-19 on our authorities.

Our core work for the year focused on business rate avoidance, fairer funding, workforce issues, welfare and lobbying government to commit to successor arrangements for EU funding.

In October 2019, HM Treasury announced a 1 per cent increase in the Public Works Loans Board's (PWLB) interest rate for new loans. This had potential to cost councils an extra £70 million in the next 12 months. We expressed concerns over the impact this was likely to have on the financial viability of capital schemes and promoted the UK Municipal Bonds agency instead.

Our 2020 Annual Local Government Finance Conference took place on 7 January 2020. It featured speakers from across the political spectrum, including the then Minister for Local Government and Homelessness, Luke Hall who confirmed that the Government planned to consult on the Fair Funding Review in Spring 2020.

We continued our work on the impact on councils of funding and policy decisions in the mainstream benefits system, including the significant growth in the Universal Credit caseload and the need to support housing services.

The Board also commissioned work to review the impact of the Local Housing Allowance rate on homelessness costs to councils. The research conducted for the LGA by Policy in Practice shows that the shortfall between income and rents is leading to significant costs for councils and we called for rates to be lifted.

2020/21 Final Local Government Finance Settlement

On 6 February 2020 the Government published the 2020/21 final Local Government Finance Settlement. The LGA welcomed the fact that the settlement had been published quickly into the government's new term, however we were disappointed that the £220 million needed to pay for the higher than expected rise in the National Living Wage (NLW) wasn't included.

The final settlement was debated in Parliament on 24 February, when the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Robert Jenrick, confirmed that the settlement would include a £49.2 billion 'funding package' for local councils, including an extra £1 billion of grant funding for children and adults social care. The Secretary of State also announced that a £40 million surplus on the levy account would be returned to local government.

2020 March Budget

The Government's first budget under Rishi Sunak was announced on the 11 March where it pledged £5bn for the NHS and public services coping with coronavirus through hardship funding and business rate relief. At this point we had little idea of the impending lockdown that would come into force only weeks later and the longer- term financial challenges our councils would face.

We were, however, already supporting councils in regards to staff returning to services in response to the pandemic, furlough arrangements and the development of the death in service benefit scheme.

2020 has been an unprecedented year and the work of the board since March 2020 has very much focused on funding for councils and our long-term viability as we navigate our communities and councils through COVID-19.



Safer and Stronger Communities Board Councillor Hannah Dalton

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
Deputy Chair, Safer and Stronger Communities Board

The Safe and Stronger Communities Board (SSCB) has a wide remit promoting safe and secure local communities.

COVID-19

The board has policy responsibility for a number of areas that have been highlighted as part the emergency response to the pandemic notably civil resilience, emergency planning/Local Resilience Forums and mortality management. In addition, building on its earlier work and relationships in these areas, the board has played a critical role around support for victims of domestic abuse, licensing and regulation, shielding structures and support for vulnerable people, online harms, early release of prisoners, counter-extremism and community cohesion, support for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community as well as starting to look ahead towards stabilisation and recovery.

As part of this Officers were quick to develop and publish a COVID-19 specific version of the LGAs councillor guide to civil emergencies and subsequently followed with guidance for councillors on civil emergency structures, both of which were received positively.

Domestic Abuse Bill

As result of the coronavirus and the stay at home measures put in place, domestic violence has received unprecedented press coverage not least because of the serious implications for victims of domestic who would face greater exposure to those perpetrating the crime.

Domestic abuse was already a key priority for the board, who heard from the new Domestic Abuse Commissioner Nicole Jacobs in November 2019. During lockdown the Domestic Abuse Bill had its second reading and was sent to the Public Bill Committee; SSCB responded to their call for written evidence to assist with its scrutiny of the Bill, as well as giving evidence to the Committee in person

Reforms of Building Control

In April 2019 the government published its Building a Safer Future Consultation which set out its reform programme for building safety. There are a number of proposals as part of this including a Building Safety Regulator (BSR) which would be a function within the HSE to implement and enforce the new regime, as well as provide stronger oversight of the safety and performance of all buildings. Much of the details still needs to be discussed but it is evident that local authority building control teams will play a central role in the BSR's delivery of the new regime.

Building safety

The Board has continued to work with MHCLG and the Home office to support building safety reform and the remediation of dangerous buildings, however work has been disrupted as a result of COVID-19, in particular the remediation of dangerous buildings.

Counter-extremism and community cohesion

Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, presented to the Board the Commission's priorities around hateful extremism, moving to being victim focused as well as taking a rights-based approach, all of which was supported by the SSCB.

As a result of lockdown several councils have reported their concerns around simmering community tensions and how this will play out as we emerge from lockdown. As a result, the Board has been working with colleagues at the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE) to explore these themes, encouraging councils to share their experiences and challenges through the SIGCE's Knowledge Hub.

Tackling modern slavery

The Board met with Dame Sarah Thornton, who was appointed as the UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner in June 2019, and discussed the role of the public sector in tackling modern slavery and the need to raise levels of awareness on the ground.

Serious violent crime

Tackling violent crime remains an important topic for the Board and Patrick Green, CEO of the Kinsella Trust came to present on knife crime among young people during transitional periods such as when children move from what is often the smaller world of primary education to secondary. The Board widely supported the need for more youth workers and recognised the impact that a positive relationship with a trusted adult can have.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank members of the Independent Think Tank and Independent Group for all their support over the past year.



Local Partnerships Councillor Tony Saffell

North West Leicestershire

I am proud to represent the Independent Group on the Board of Local Partnerships (LPs) – a joint venture between the LGA, HM Treasury and the Welsh Government.

LPs was formed in 2009 and works solely for the benefit of the public sector. Our purpose is to help public sector organisations face the ever-increasing challenge of meeting rising demands for services, with shrinking budgets.

Central government, local and combined authorities, devolved administrations and other public bodies all need impartial expert help and, very often, do not know where to turn for that help. LPs fills that gap by providing specialists who bring a formidable combination of public and private sector experience. We offer the highest quality practical, pragmatic and effective support to the public sector by an organisation that belongs to the public sector.

We provide capacity and capability where it is needed, helping to form a bridge between central government policy and local delivery. Our support is especially relevant in helping councils and combined authorities shape and create place-based growth. We work closely with Homes England and HMCLG, directly supporting councils to develop and deliver their housing growth plans. This includes accelerating housing development to meet regeneration and housing growth objectives, and the planning and funding of social, digital and enabling infrastructure. We work with authorities to renegotiate public sector contracts, develop their commercial capabilities, and help them achieve and maintain financial resilience.

LPs' officers work closely with Board Members to ensure the owners' current priorities are pursued. In addition to key areas outlined above, some recent activity highlights include:

- support for Department for Rural and Agriculture (DEFRA) and DfT in Leeds and Birmingham to produce successful business cases for implementing Clean Air Zone schemes which went live in January 2020, improving the air quality in those cities.
- the launch of the 'Re:fit 4 framework' in 2020. Through this procurement initiative, jointly owned with the GLA, we support local authorities to implement energy efficiency measures and local energy generation projects on their assets. This helps reduce carbon emissions, generate income and deliver change at scale and pace.
- support for DEFRA to formulate and assess the impact on local authorities of policies that have featured prominently in the government's 'Resources and Waste Strategy, which lays the foundation for plans to double resource productivity and eliminate avoidable waste of all kinds (including plastic waste) by 2050.
- support for green energy projects with 42 solar farms, wind turbines and energy efficiency schemes to reach completion in Wales, resulting in the reduction of 113,000 tonnes of CO2 being released into the atmosphere and financial savings or income of more than £60m to the public sector.

I hope you now have a much better idea of who we are, what we do and the successes we help our clients achieve. We strive to be humble about our contribution and proud of our results, and look forward to delivering many more tangible, positive results for the public sector.

localpartnerships.org.uk



From our representatives in Europe

EU Committee of the Regions

Councillor Andrew Cooper

Kirklees Council

This represents my final report as the LGA representative on the EU Committee of the Regions. The role of the body is to provide local and regional government input into EU policies but participation in the EU CoR offered much more than that. The most valuable aspect for me was the ability to see best practice in local government across the European Union. Travel broadens the mind it also provides an insight into what is possible in some countries but somehow is not possible in our own.

During my time on the EU CoR I lead on two Opinions the main policy output of the Committee of the Regions and attended and influenced UN Climate Summits. My colleague and Alternate COR member Cllr Gillian Ford also lead on an Opinion on the European Education Area which represented the last opinion of a UK Representative. Our involvement, input and positive approach was genuinely appreciated by our colleagues from across the EU and their generosity of spirit towards us was extremely touching given the nature of the UK withdrawal from the EU.

My proudest achievement was helping get greater input from Local and Regional governments around the world into national Governments plans to address climate change. I got backing from the European Parliament, and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) that represents Local and Regional Governments from around the world

The last year of our involvement was dogged by uncertainty and I attended my last meeting in December 2019 and I was pleased to be able to take my son, a politics student (at my expense) to see a European Institution at work.

It was sad to leave colleagues and friends we had made over the past five years but also sad that the UK will be poorer from the lack of the opportunity to collaborate to the same degree with our counterparts across the water.





congress of the Council of Europe

Councillor Martin Fodor

Bristol City Council

congress brings together over 300 representatives of local and regional governments from across the 47 member states of the Council of Europe (CoE). Delegates usually meet twice yearly in Strasbourg for plenary sessions, with local and regional chambers also debating issues of concern, and there are three committees with sessions that discuss election monitoring at local and regional level in member states, current affairs, and governance issues. Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law are the three priorities of the CoE. Unfortunately, the March 2020 session was cancelled at short notice due to the pandemic.

I'm one of 18 UK delegates plus a youth representative and we also meet with the UK permanent representative in Strasbourg.

During the year hot topics included the ongoing conflict between Russia and the Ukraine, continued suppression of democracy with elected Mayors under arrest in Turkey, and border issues like migration, refugees, and minority languages. Safeguarding democracy has been a major theme and the congress is the responsible body for European Local Democracy Week in October.

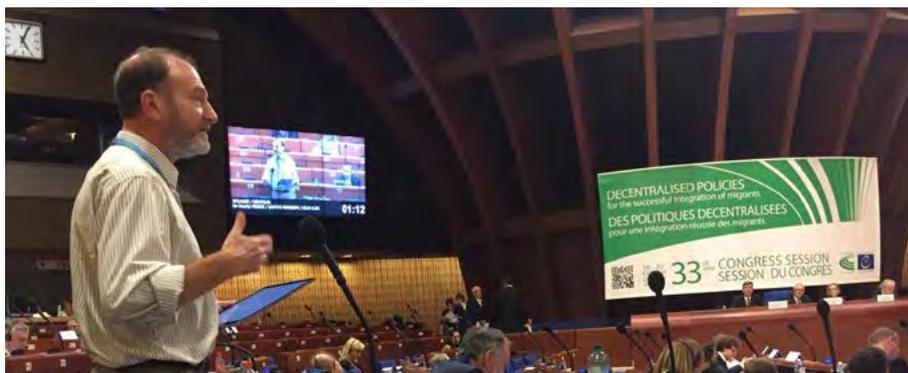
I also contributed to debates on matters like protection of whistle blowers, the need for procurement to be ethical and transparent, the political difficulties in ensuring appropriate remuneration of elected representatives, and support for the UN Sustainable Development Goals – adopted by congress during the year -including the need to tackle climate breakdown. I drew on examples from local government experience in Bristol. The congress also adopted a statement on the social rights of young people. Participation of youth delegates is part

of the democratic reinvigoration project; their voices in debates are always worthwhile, with their fringe meeting always worth attending.

During the year I was invited to be congress representative on the Council of Europe working group on E- Democracy, ensuring the report with guidelines and tools sent to 47 government Ministers in December promoted the roles of local government as innovator for new, complementary forms of online democracy – in hindsight especially relevant - plus an insight into how much more can be done to broaden participation in all aspects of our democracy.

I moved to the Governance Committee during the year in order to become the rapporteur of a report on Smart Cities, now under development following a conference I held in Hungary in September 2019. My outline for the report focusses on ensuring smart cities are democratic and inclusive with a set of case studies of how local authorities have initiated smart city projects that meet the needs of disabled people, respond to community demands and maintain openness regarding data and decision making . It is scheduled for completion in 2020. I also spoke on these issues again in 2019 at the Central and Eastern Europe conference on E- Government.

Working with the UK delegation and collaborating with colleagues from across Europe has been a real exchange of ideas and experience. The UK input to congress through the year has been appreciated by colleagues at a time when EU Brexit was looming.





congress of the Council of Europe

Councillor Linda Gillham

Runnymede Borough Council

The congress represents 150,000 local and regional authorities. The work of the congress is divided into Local and Regional chambers and I sit on the local chamber in a political grouping of Independents and Liberals

I sit on the Monitoring Committee and our brief is to attend and observe local elections in member countries. Each of the 47 Member States ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government and we recently had a presentation on a Contemporary Commentary on the provisions of the Charter. At our meeting in Metz, France in February we looked at what local self-government means under the provisions of the Charter.

The rapporteur (Jakob Wiene Netherlands), said “one of the provisions of the Charter which I consider very important is the consultation of local and regional authorities by central governments. This is a recurrent issue which is regularly the subject of recommendations following congress monitoring visits,” I think this is something we all recognise as important.

An example is Mostar which has been on the congress’ agenda for many years, in particular since 2017, The aim is to contribute to finding a lasting solution to restore local democracy in the city of Mostar, where no local elections have been held since 2008 due to a political deadlock.

Mostar has been subject to several monitoring visits and the congress are committed to finding a resolution as the situation in Mostar constitutes a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.



Council of European Municipalities and Regions

Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

North Kesteven District Council and Lincolnshire County Council

It was another busy year for the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), the ‘European LGA’, bringing together 60-plus associations from 40+ countries to lobby on behalf of 150,000 local councils.

This was my fourth year as the CEMR spokesperson on environment, climate and energy. Although the UK has now left the EU, the nature of our future relationship and the extent to which UK laws and policies will be influenced by our neighbours is still unclear; moreover participating in networks such as CEMR enables the UK local government sector to maintain a dialogue and exchange of good practice with our counterparts in the EU.

The environment and climate is a key policy area, with the EU giving high priority to its ambitious “Green Deal” initiative and preparations being made for the next Climate Summit to be held in Glasgow, at a time when severe weather events are demonstrating the impact of climate change on our communities and giving greater urgency on the need to act. Thank you to all of our think tank members who inputted into this work, having such a lively and passionate group gives us a powerful voice.

CEMR monitors and influences European policy in relation to circular economy from the local government perspective, contributed to the reflections on a potential revision of the water framework directive, and is involved in the development of policies and new laws on air quality, waste, water, nature and biodiversity, noise pollution within the framework of the Green Deal. The CEMR is also influencing the work of the European Commission on the urban vehicle access regulation and monitoring the implementation of the clean mobility package.

Concerning energy and climate, CEMR is following-up the implementation of the EU package on clean energy; calling for appropriate resources for policies aiming to decarbonise our societies; facilitate and promote exchange of knowledge and experience; support capacity-building initiatives; and contribute to research and studies in this area. CEMR has continued its advocacy on the role of subnational governments on mitigation and adaptation at UN climate events and assists its members in their dialogues with their central governments and their actions towards creating resilient cities and societies.

At the international level, CEMR promotes the role of local governments in mitigation and adaptation; presses for greater ambition at UN climate events; and supports the inclusion of the climate perspective in the international actions of European local authorities.

As we look ahead there is a lot more work to do on our shared green ambitions with our European friends; something we are doing remotely since the onset of COVID-19.



Independent Group contact details

We have an expert team of Officers supporting LGA Independent Group councillors across the country.

We always want to hear from our members, prospective councillors and those interested in the work of the Independent Group.

You can find out more about our work on our website, social media or by contacting a member of the team:

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