

Daring to be different

Annual Report 2015/16



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Introduction

The Independent Group is the most diverse group of councillors and the most representative of the public. We are in touch with and committed to our communities, and that is what gets us elected. Therein lies our strength and the reason we have such a powerful contribution to make. We dare to be different and work together to be most effective.

Our Independent Group's voices are much needed – listening, considering carefully and speaking up for our communities, our councils and our country. The Local Government Association (LGA) forms the vehicle for you to achieve more with your residents, getting national support and negotiating with government.

The success of our work in supporting Independent Group members, helping raise skills, profile, and reputation is demonstrated in remarkable year-on-year election success, for all of our groups.





Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

Leader of the LGA Independent Group

Vice Chairman of the Local Government Association (LGA)
Lincolnshire County Council
and North Kesteven District Council

Key role for Independent Group members

Listening carefully, looking at the facts and focussing on the best outcomes for our residents simply makes sense to us and to the public. This has been a remarkable year where our calls for a better democracy are finally being heard loud and clear, putting us at the heart of changing British politics. As the old three parties have lost their stranglehold in many areas, more councils than ever are led by our group members. Still more councils are in no overall control, giving our members a stronger voice at the table, especially if they can keep together. Mr Corbyn spoke in favour of no party whip and Mr Cameron was forced to do likewise for the referendum. There is clear recognition of a better way to do democracy, where individual elected members represent many residents and each has an important role in getting the best decisions for our residents.

Our work in getting fair media coverage for Independents and parties other than the old three is beginning to bear fruit and we'll do more on this. Coupled with our call for electoral reform with fairer methods of counting the votes, we are enhancing opportunities for our members, and supporting each other to do the job well.

To increase our effectiveness at the LGA, we increased the information offered, skills training, regional events, task groups and the number of Independent accredited peers.

Our members have responded with increasing inspiration and success. More members than ever before are speaking up at conferences, in the press and through the LGA, bringing a sound common-sense approach, well in touch with their communities and representing them well. Well informed and skilled, our members have played increasingly useful roles in their communities and their councils and attracted others. More of our member voices are heard far and wide, because they make sense and contribute positively to the debates.

The Independent Group is the only group to have grown consistently over the past five years and is the third largest group at the LGA. Within our group, our political balance remains broadly unchanged; Independents 66 per cent, UKIP 20 per cent, Plaid Cymru and Green 7 per cent each. We are diverse, able to listen, to think and act independently and work together to be more effective. Each of the groups is well represented and we have achieved a cohesive strength. We each bring a substantial amount and work together to be more effective.

Drawing on our members' interests, our group has worked hard on supporting funding for our councils and developing some innovative ways of delivering services. We campaigned against disproportionate 'growth' without adequate infrastructure and against forced academisation without quality. We raised concerns on some proposed models of devolution to new mayors covering huge and diverse geographical areas. Both in England and Wales, we have long supported and continue to call for genuine devolution of power and money from central to local government, with Cornwall leading the way.

Our achievements over the past year make impressive reading. They are shared achievements, with more of our group members contributing to policy and improving local government. The Independent Group creates a powerful force for the benefit of our members and the communities we serve.

Successes to date

Members skilled and well informed

- Significantly increased the number of councillors actively engaged in the work of the group, through responses to weekly bulletins and other initiatives.
- Record number of councillors are taking up places on the LGA leadership offer.
- Highest ever attendance at Independent Group AGM and LGA conference sessions and at November's Independent Group conference.
- Our members successfully completed the 2nd Next Generation programme, designed to help our leaders develop and take bigger roles locally and nationally.
- Our key support to councils and councillors following local elections and change of control has been effective, supporting our members in negotiations.
- Six regional meetings were held in Bristol, Bromyard, Chelmsford, Ely, Llandrindod Wells and Lincoln, with thanks to our regional chairmen. The events informing and developing policy ideas to feed into the work of the LGA. This can be sharing good practice or developing ideas for legislative change.
- To support the work of the group in influencing national policy, nine information and development sessions covered issues such as housing, children services, scrutiny and local government finance.
- Increased the number of our peer members working in other councils.
- Provided timely and effective advice to hundreds of members through our office and regional peers.
- Supported individual council improvements.

A credible and effective force

- Launched eight Think Tanks giving councillors greater opportunity to shape the LGA's policy work.
- Provided influential amendments to key policy documents such as the Spending Review consultation, business rates consultation and Devolution.
- Introduced a Performance Protocol for our board appointees to ensure we are consistent and proactive within LGA governance structures.
- Closely monitored the group budget to ensure funds are used wisely and within budget.

Raising our profile

- Delivered key note speeches at showcase events such as the UKIP and Green Party Conferences, 1st Annual 'Make Votes Matter' demonstration and DCN Future Leaders programme. Indeed, all our lead members have been very active.
- Lobbied the BBC and other broadcasters for fairer representation of Independents.
- Greatly increased media coverage for our group members.

Leading national policy

- Took strategic approach with our vice-presidents within Parliament, raising issues of planning and housing without adequate infrastructure, health and social care integration, mental health and employment.
- Tackled the EU commissioner on the Trans-Atlantic Trade Agreement, TTIP.
- Played a key role in shaping the LGA's culture, tourism and sport agenda through our chairmanship. Much more is listed in the board reports.
- Established a task group to explore options and recommend changes to the electoral voting system.

What Next?

- Assist in recruitment, training and retention of Independent Group members to secure a sound future. Encourage group networks to seek and support a range of good candidates, both men and women to enhance our reputation in government.
- Increasing the influence of our members in decision-making across England and Wales in both local and in national government.
- Work towards electoral reform, using the campaign to promote an inclusive, more representative and more collaborative kind of leadership.
- Encourage more positive media attention for our members and issues important to our members. Showcase the work of our members to demonstrate their talent and success, enhancing our reputation.
- Provide more regional meetings to support members with skills, information and keep the LGA in tune with members and their residents. Encourage all our members to speak, vote and more importantly, think about what our residents need and set about achieving it through work at local and national levels.
- Work to keep local government solvent and effective. We call for a proper share of funding and adjust to manage with less.
- Take a lead in shaping local government in genuine devolution to politically balanced and manageable bodies.

We will see what changes the referendum brings, but it is clear that no one party is always right. Finding adequate funding and getting a genuine devolution of power to councils, without losing our electorate on the way will need a cohesive and innovative approach. This is a world where our Independent Group members are uniquely well suited. We are an important force to ensure plans are focussed on the best interests of our residents.

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has inspired me to lead our group forward successfully. In particular, thanks to my Deputy Peter Reeve, to our Treasurer Bob Dutton and to the Independent Executive Committee, whose work has helped drive a very successful year.

Our regional peers have once again supported councillors in their areas and worked with us to deliver successful events, each tailored to local needs and aspirations.

Thank you to Mike Haines, our National Lead Peer and our regional peers, Apu Bagchi, Graham Brown and Colin Mann for their excellent service and commitment to supporting our members.

Thank you to Councillor Hugh Evans, Leader of the Independent Group and Councillor Dyfed Edwards, Leader of Plaid Cymru of the Welsh LGA.

Our thanks to the Independent Group nominated LGA vice-Presidents, who have joined us at various events and spoken on our behalf within Parliament.

Thank you to the members of the Independent Group from right across England and Wales who represent us on the Programme Boards and Special Interest Groups.

In our group office, I thank Carl Cheevers, Vanessa Chagas and Noleen Rosen, for their brilliant work for the group. Carl is now moving on to be the Chief Executive of Harpenden Town Council.

Our Independent conferences, regional events and regular development days have been the rich ground for developing consensus for me and our lead members to take forward on your behalf, making sure that our voices are properly heard.

Conclusion

The Independent Group at the LGA extends a warm welcome to all Independent Group members. Since your council is in membership of the LGA, you have the facilities and our small staff team to support your work as a councillor and a route to directly influence national government, helping them keep their feet on the ground as they make laws that affect our residents.

I have travelled widely around the country in this past year to listen, represent your views and do my best to support and inspire our Independent Group councillors. Thank you for the warm welcome.

Thanks to each of you, members of the 2,347 strong team of elected Independent Group councillors, who have given your talent, skills and time to local government and to our residents. This work matters to each one of the millions of people our councils serve every day. We are seeing unprecedented changes in local government. The mettle and determination of our listening and effective councillors is needed now and increasingly in the future.

Good luck and best wishes in all that you do for our communities, both locally and nationally.



Group budget Report 2015/16 and 2016/17

Councillor Bob Dutton OBE

Wrexham County Borough Council
LGA Independent Group Treasurer

2015/16 Budget report

In the last financial year the Independent Group had a budget of £19,467 and at the end of the year had a small underspend of £1,000.

Once again we were able to ensure our small budget went far and helped to deliver many positive outcomes throughout the year. We increased the number of regional meetings held across England and Wales, helping to increase the profile of the group and making it more accessible to our members. As ever we also delivered a very successful Independent Group Conference in November which stimulated excellent debate and discussion amongst our membership.

2016/17 Budget

Our activity budget for 2016/17 has been set at £19,089 which is a slight decrease on the previous year. This comes as a result of the slight reduction in our proportionality figure at the LGA despite a rise in our numbers. This budget will be used to continue our programme of regional meetings with a particular commitment to delivering sessions in the north west, north east and far south west.



Children and Young People

Councillor Helen Powell

Lincolnshire County Council

Deputy Chair, Children and Young People Board

Councillor Paul Cullen and I have represented the Independent Group on the Children and Young People (CYP) Board for the last term. It's been very enjoyable to be able to put forward ideas and work with these very dedicated people.

We have all been extremely busy again, right up there in the frame of things. A lot of hard work has resulted in much better outcomes for local authorities. But the work is constant as it comes thick and fast.

Councillor David Simmonds' term ended, as he moved on to another equally challenging role. We welcomed one of our members into the chair, Cllr Roy Perry (Hampshire), and he got us underway immediately with pressing issues.

The board are excellently supported by our dedicated, outstanding team of officers based at the LGA. This year's focus has been on education, early years and children's services

We believe it is vital that we concentrate on the quality of education, rather than on the status of the school.

A pathway forward is being forged with schools and councils working together, benefitting from the interaction and helping each other's improvements.

A whole host of work has been done, and we have all enjoyed getting to grips with the challenges. Here are some of the agenda items we worked on:

- mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse
- educational achievement of children in care

- child sexual exploitation pilot scheme
- performance, accountability and multi-academy trusts
- the Youth Justice system –better training for all professionals, regarding mental health issues in young people
- introduction of a national funding formula for schools
- unaccompanied refugee children
- Ofsted.

The Ofsted work has been of particular interest. The new chair David Hoare came to make a presentation and take questions. Realising down-grading schools is counterproductive, they are actively working as their champions, using their wealth of best practice and over 23 years of information on schools to encourage and support and promoting peer support with other schools. Three areas they want to improve are numeracy, literacy and early years provision (0-5).

Recently we have seen the release of the 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' White Paper. We have had deep discussions on this with many concerns being raised by local authorities. We produced a very effective LGA response which was taken to Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP.

The board's work again has been pivotal in raising important issues from councils, getting them debated, finding solutions, and exploring the options before taking them to the relevant MPs.

There have been roundtable meetings, conferences, conference calls and four board meetings.

We are extremely indebted to our great team of highly trained officers based at the LGA in London, who work tirelessly for all the children and young people in England and Wales through local authorities.



Community Wellbeing

Councillor Gillian Ford

London Borough of Havering

Deputy Chair, Community Wellbeing Board

This year has been a learning curve for the members of the Community Wellbeing Board as we have been one of two pilots trialling a portfolio model of working, splitting into four portfolio areas with a lead member leading on each; Future Vision of Health and Care Systems, Funding and Support for Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing, and People.

Over the last year I have been leading on the People Policy Group with agreed priorities of: autism and learning disabilities, mental health especially children's, housing and health/social care, dementia, older people/ageing, end of life care, personalisation and carers. We have the largest number of outside body appointments and I have attended a number of boards including those on dementia, children's mental health, learning disabilities and autism.

In February, I chaired the Ageing Population event with Lord Filkin as keynote speaker. We captured case studies on the challenges and successes through roundtable discussions, which are currently being developed into a report on good practice.

In March I chaired a successful first joint Public Health England (PHE) and LGA Mental Health Conference, which focused on the wider universal services, with Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP as guest speaker.

I have been involved with the agreement and launch of the PM's 2020 Dementia Challenge Implementation Plan and post-diagnosis support pledge. I am now working with our partners to look at delivering the implementation plan. The portfolio group has been successful in influencing documents and have agreed and signed the Think Local Act Personal Memorandum of Understanding.

We have undertaken a number of lobbying processes including funding to clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) on children's mental health as the Government committed additional funding to support mental health services for children, allocating the funds to CCGs. This has however been problematic for some authorities, who have not been advised on how the CCGs are spending the funding. Another lobbying success resulted in councils disregarding the War Disablement Pension in the contribution to care costs, with the Ministry of Defence funding council's to do so.

A number of articles have been published in First magazine including mental health, armed forces and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). We have agreed the publication of autism case studies, responded to a consultation by the National Audit Office on personalised budgets and made a number of representations including to the LGA Housing Commission.

We continue to be invited to APPGs and I have spoken on behalf of the LGA on various topics including housing, health and older people.

We are currently lobbying on the Local Housing Allowance cap and supported accommodation. Working with the National Housing Federation we are concerned the cap may not cover the total costs of supported accommodation, which has led to uncertainty in the market and stalled new developments. We will be undertaking a review of the Armed Forces Community Covenant and are working with PHE on the Mental Health Prevention Concordat and toolkit for councils on mental health and Joint Strategic Needs Assessments. There will be an autism event in June alongside a publication on good design for autism and a guide for councils on autism.

Future work includes development of a CAMHS campaign, a good practice guide on end-of-life care, an evaluation of costs and identification of good practice in children to adult learning disability services and a response to the Department of Health Carers Strategy.



Culture, Tourism and Sport

Councillor Ian Stephens

Isle of Wight Council

Chair, Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

This year has been an extremely busy year with 2015 being the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta, and throughout England there were many events, which the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport (CTS) Board supported. 2016 sees the 400th Anniversary of the death of Shakespeare with more events to support.

I was involved in round table discussions with a number of ministers and had input which helped to shape the first Culture White Paper for 50 years, and feel that this also assisted in the status quo for funding of the Arts in the Spending Review. This saw a 'flat lining' of funding in the areas of culture tourism and sport, and speaking with the Minister allowed me to ensure that councils are fully engaged and involved.

I met with the Sports Minister, Tracey Crouch MP and discussed the new Sports Strategy which has taken a more holistic view on family activity. Ongoing meetings with Sport England brought a greater understanding from both sides with pressures to create and provide under difficult financial constraints. The LGA response supported a more proportionate approach to National Portfolio funding, with additional funding streams to museums and libraries and a more place based approach to funding, which is in line with the devolution agenda.

The Joint LGA/ Department for Culture, Media & Sport Leadership for Libraries Taskforce has continued into a second year and has now been granted funded to see it through this term of Parliament. When we meet there is occasional tension, however this is the role of the board, assisting with policy and also challenging. Such as the period prior's Ambition for Libraries, the outcome will determine how central

and local government can support libraries. We maintain that there is never a 'one fits all' solution for libraries, a view which we have taken to the table every time.

Central government has decided that Visit Britain should be an active force for the industry throughout the UK with an emphasis on the 'bigger picture'. I believe that it is important for local government to have a strong voice in the new national arrangements and therefore I met with Visit Britain's Director of Strategy and Communications to emphasise the importance of local areas having the flexibility to allocate the £40 million Discover England Fund in line with local priorities and allied to devolution deals where this makes sense.

Arts Council England (ACE) is formulating a new grant funding stream arrangement post 2018. I was pleased to respond to ACE's consultation on these funding arrangements. The LGA response supported a more proportionate approach to National Portfolio funding, opening up more funding streams to museums and libraries and a more place based approach to funding, which is in line with the devolution agenda.

I recently chaired the Cultural Commissioning Programme National Learning Seminar at which Kent County Council and Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group shared how they have embedded culture in commissioning opportunities. I was also very touched by the reading group's presentation, which showed the value of libraries, culture and interaction to bring people back into our society.

The LGA and Sport England Leadership Essentials programme continues and I endeavour to attend both these and those of culture when possible. These events provide so much opportunity for lead members to gain information and network. The board has supported nine portfolio holders to lead transformational change of sport and leisure services, improve partnership working with health and strengthen their offer to commissioners.



Improvement and Innovation

Councillor Shirley Pannell

North Kesteven District Council

Deputy Chair, Improvement and Innovation Board

It has been a year of change on my board. There has been a change in Chairman, with Cllr David Simmonds taking over from Cllr Peter Fleming, and a new deputy chair. There have also been proposed changes to board work, with a new set of priorities, more portfolio holders, and the introduction of regional ambassadors.

I have remained the lead member for productivity, and continued to work with the productivity team. On a podcast, I introduced the scheme whereby councils can apply for financial help in order to bring in experts in a particular field connected to productivity. I recently visited Derby City Council's regeneration team, a visit I arranged myself, to see how the council is tackling the loss of government funding. I was very impressed to see what their team are doing to offset this loss by attracting income through house building, small businesses, and European funding, to name a few.

It has been a somewhat different year for me on my board, but I have been involved with the areas of work covered, and I have contributed wherever I can on behalf of the Independent Group. I intervened when it appeared the portfolio and ambassador positions were not being fairly spread.

Part of my role has been to continue to look at councils who are experiencing difficulties, whether it be financial, behavioural, or due to failing Ofsted reports. Where councils are involved who have Independent control, or a high number of Independent councillors, I elaborate our peers' involvement.

Solace national graduate development programme

In April this year, I went to Warwick University at the invitation of Solace. I was joined by the Chairman and Deputy Chairmen of my board. The graduates were all viewed as the chief executives of the future. Ours was the second day of the programme, and involved us telling the graduates about ourselves, and how we became councillors. There were also workshops, where we discussed within our groups the relationship between councillors and officers. They were definitely interested about my being an Independent councillor, and hopefully they came away knowing we are not at all odd, and are just as knowledgeable as political groups. One interesting aspect of the day was that I found out more about my fellow board members than before and enjoyed conversations with them

Peer mentor refreshment

The refresher day, together with new peer accreditation, was very interesting, and it was an opportunity to meet with LGA colleagues, and listen to how peer work is distributed. The afternoon sessions, with small groups carrying out an exercise, was interesting and challenging. Although our group do not get enough peer work, it is very important that we have refreshers like this, and some new peers were accredited, which gives us more scope.



Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport (EEHT)

Councillor Julian German

Cornwall Council, Deputy Chair, Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board

The Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board provides strategic oversight of the LGA's policy, regulatory and improvement activity in relation to the economy and environment, including transport, employment and skills, economic development and business support, housing, planning, waste and climate change, in line with the LGA priorities and any specific regulatory and LGA European lobbying priorities as they relate to this activity.

Councillor John Northcott was Independent Group lead and Deputy Chair of the EEHT Board from September 2014 until December 2015 when he stepped down due to ill health. Cllr Northcott sadly passed away in March 2016 and is greatly missed by colleagues both at the LGA and at Mole Valley District Council.

The Housing and Planning Bill has been a focus of work for the board. We have also considered a wide range of issues ranging from EU circular economy proposals and meeting EU recycling targets, maintaining momentum on local growth, air quality and have discussed the National Infrastructure Commission with its Chair, Lord Adonis.

Housing: Neal Hudson, Executive Director of Research at Savills, addressed members on research the board had commissioned on the impacts of housing reforms on housing supply and tenure of stock.

Through LGA leadership of the debate on the Housing Bill we have the opportunity to ensure that a much bigger agenda about place shaping is developed, focusing on issues such as skills, welfare reform, community safety and an aging population that are vital parts of delivering our housing ambition. We should draw on existing work such as Hidden Talents which showed that empowered local government can deliver the local construction skills needed to be able to build the number of new houses required.

Circular Economy: Members have discussed the proposals with MEPs, UK government representatives, the Commission official leading the work on the proposals and the CBI team in Brussels. Meetings had also taken place with a former Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) Minister and Defra officials. Following these meetings LGA policy position papers on the EU Circular Economy and meeting EU recycling targets have been produced. The board highlighted that there had been a 78 percent reduction in waste to landfill (per household) since 2002/03, which would have been impossible without investment from local authorities.

National Infrastructure Commission: The LGA has welcomed its creation and the potential it has to provide an independent and long-term, 10-30-years, articulation of the country's strategic infrastructure. In particular, councils welcome that for the first time there will be an evidence-based assessment and recommendations which will inform public debate and that government decisions and investment will be supported by greater consensus than there has been to date. The Commission should help improve the long-term competitiveness of UK Plc. The Government intends to provide the Commission with a broad mandate to examine all sectors of economic infrastructure including transport, energy, water and sewage, waste, flood defences, and digital communications. It will also be required to assess the effects of options on other parts of the infrastructure system. This is welcome given the vital role of councils in helping to meet the local and sub-regional infrastructure needs of people and businesses in their areas.

As a board member, I presented at the Westminster briefing on local bus services and Chaired the workshop on housing and planning at the Independent Group Conference November. As a lead member I have regularly contributed to LGA position papers.

I would like to thank colleagues for their involvement with the board and the Independent Group for giving me the opportunity of stepping up into the Deputy Chair role



Resources

Councillor Clarence Barrett

London Borough of Havering
Deputy Chair, Resources Board

Over the last year, the Resources Board, along with the Community Wellbeing Board, piloted the new ways of working initiative by adopting a portfolio model of operation. This focused less on the formal 'Board' type meetings and more on interactive, virtual based communications.

The Resources Portfolio was divided into four policy groupings; Local Government Finance; Strategic Finance and Infrastructure, Welfare Reform, and Workforce. Each of the four lead members took on responsibility for a specific policy group, myself being workforce. There was a great deal of activity across the Portfolio over the year and below are just some of the highlights:

Local Government Finance – LGA lobbying on the final 2016/17 settlement resulted in new money of £416 million, including £90.5 million in Rural Services Delivery Grant. However, New Homes Bonus is set to reduce by £800 million in order to increase the Better Care Fund. Business Rates appeals took a fresh turn as a number of NHS Trusts applied for charitable status thereby reducing their liability, and in turn their payments to local authorities. However, counsel advice has been obtained by the LGA to deal with the applications.

Pensions – with all 89 local government Pension Funds being consolidated into eight separate pools, worth some £230 billion in total, the focus has been around governance and operational arrangements, developing a National Infrastructure Platform for investment and projected savings through reduced fund manager fees.

Skills and Apprenticeships – Cllr Linda Van den Hende was appointed LGA Champion for Skills and has been doing a great job. Linda spoke at a Public Health Conference in February, is conducting a council

wide consultation on skills needs and gaps and recently took part in a podcast focusing on workforce issues.

Integration of health and social care workforce – a resource was developed entitled ‘return to social work’, aimed at linking registered social workers who are not practicing with current vacancies. Funding was also established to support the development of an apprenticeship route for family support workers in partnership with the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS).

Government consultations – there were numerous consultations over the course of the year where Independent member input helped shape the final submissions, for example; efficient council tax collection, 2016 Budget Settlement, Trade Union Bill, public sector exit payments, New Homes Bonus and the Independent Living Fund grant.

Other areas of interest taken up by the portfolio included employment law, the National Living Wage, Independent Review of the Community Infrastructure Levy, New Homes Bonus, capital financing, European funding and local government pay.

I have tried to keep the Independent Resources ‘Think Tank’ group updated on the work of the Resources Portfolio as well as specific workforce issues. It would be good to expand the membership of our ‘Think Tank’, particularly as there are such significant developments ahead of us.

I am also the Independent Group representative on the LGA Business Rates Retention Task and Finish Group. This is one of the most significant changes in local government finance for many years and it is vital that we, along with the Government, establish a system that is fit for purpose. This should reflect the true cost of services, provide a sensible method of supporting councils where business rate growth is very limited and undertake a review of the current schedule of exemptions and flexibilities, so that it equips local government with the right tools to encourage growth, jobs and the economy while providing vital services aligned to public health and social care.



Safer and Stronger Communities

Councillor Phillip C Evans

Conwy County Borough Council

Deputy Chair, Safer and Stronger Communities Board

This was my third year as a deputy chair and I attended all the board meetings, except one, and all of the lead members' meetings. It has been interesting to work with a broad cross-section of councillors from a wide geographical area. The board began the year with the appointment of two new lead members from the Conservative and Labour parties. The board is now chaired by Cllr Simon Blackburn (Lab), Leader of Blackpool Council.

The main work of the Safer and Stronger Communities Board (SSCB) is commenting on and trying to influence legislation as it passes through its various stages. It has been rewarding to see we have had positive outcomes in many instances all of which will be of benefit to local government.

At its September 2015 meeting, the board agreed upon six overarching themes to form its work programme for 2015/2016. These were: regulation; blue light services collaboration; public protection; policing and community safety; Prevent, counter extremism, community cohesion; crematoria and coroners' service.

As the latter topic has not been raised previously, unlike the others, it may be useful to highlight some of the areas which councillors may find of interest:

- Declining availability of land for traditional burials.
- An increase in private cremation provision has in some areas has added pressure to councils' ability to cover costs as well as maintain, and invest in, facilities.
- The interaction between the health and care systems with coroners can create delays in issuing death certificates.

- The length of time coroners' inquests can take. There seems to be variation in the approach taken by individual coroners which can impact on the bereaved.
- Deprivation of Liberty Safeguard changes are affecting the number of cases dealt with by coroners.
- The introduction of a Chief Coroner for England and Wales to oversee the coroner system had introduced a new layer of bureaucracy when the sharing of local best practice could have been an alternative.

In addition to the scheduled board and lead member meetings, I also undertook the following duties:

- Speaker at the LGA's Taxi and PHV Licensing Conference on the theme of training for elected members, effective scrutiny of the licensing function and the need for transparency in how councils will apply the new Deregulation Act.
- Chaired a workshop session on the Counter Extremism Bill at the LGA Independent Group's Annual Conference.
- Chaired the LGA's conference 'Supporting local businesses, sustaining regulatory services'. The theme was that regulation can be a very useful tool in managing and stimulating local economies.
- Represented the SSCB at the Home Office Expert Panel on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse held under the chairmanship of Karen Bradley MP, Minister for Preventing Abuse and Exploitation. At this meeting I was able to reinforce the message that even if the Crime Prosecution Service consider there are no grounds for prosecution using the 'beyond reasonable doubt' test, the Police could still report such cases to the licensing authority which could apply the 'balance of probabilities' test for fitness and propriety to hold a licence.

As in previous years, I would like to record my appreciation for the support given by all the staff in the independent Group Office as well as my colleague on the board, Cllr Colin Mann, and our substitute members, Cllr Goronwy Edwards and Cllr Clive Woodbridge.



People and Places

Councillor John Pollard

Cornwall Council

Deputy Chair, People and Places Board

The People and Places Board represents the non-metropolitan areas of England. We have worked increasingly closely with the City Regions Board which as the name suggests represents the urban areas.

The board is drawn from the County Councils Network, District Councils Network and any non-county unitaries not represented by those two bodies. It meets four times a year and its remit includes growth, transport infrastructure, skills and wider public service reform.

The People and Places Board seeks to develop greater clarity on the role of non-metropolitan authorities in enabling economic growth for the long-term benefit of residents, and on how transformation in public services can enable that. Much of our work cuts across other LGA boards and certainly this year we have focussed less on economic growth and more on the devolution agenda. As always, the benefit is the sharing of experience, the combination of effort and ensuring that the 'rural' voice is strong.

The emphasis for the last year has been:

English devolution

Our work has focused upon:

- sharing of the current status of various Devolution Deals
- discussion and debate about the Government's requirements for Devolution Deals
- intelligence about current government thinking
- access to the various select committees investigating devolution

- an understanding and appreciation of current progress of deals and limitations and restrictions that appear to pertain.

I do believe these frank exchanges have been enormously valuable in understanding the current devolution landscape and the board's views will contribute to a broader LGA Green Paper on devolution.

Superfast broadband and the digital divide

The board has compared notes and aired concerns about the failure of full coverage across the country. We have also received briefings and been able to question number of contributors, notable:

In February, Chris Townsend, Chief Executive Officer of Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK), updated the board on the BDUK project. The project had set objectives to achieve 90 per cent coverage of the UK by May 2016 and 95 per cent coverage by December 2017. 3.5 million premises had been delivered broadband to date and 4.2 million premises were on track to be delivered broadband by May BT is now delivering 30,000 to 40,000 premises with superfast broadband a week.

This information was met with a degree of scepticism as all present had stories of failure of service. However BDUK will return to the board to update on progress. Our discussion will have input into an LGA submission to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Skills and employment

A paper is being prepared to outline LGA view on the skills agenda. We have done this in collaboration with the Cities Regions Board and gives a broad understanding of current issues. The 16plus Area reviews, the need for a new impetus in providing relevant courses and the work that most areas are conducting with their Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were all part of the debate. Funding is changing, devolved powers are making a difference, and the LEPs have a role in the skills agenda, but what difference is being seen on the ground? The LGA's evidence will be published in due course.



Council of Municipalities and Regions

Councillor Linda Gillham
Runnymede Borough Council

The Council of Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the organisation of local and regional authorities across 41 European countries and has two aims:

- to influence European legislation on behalf of local authorities
- to provide an exchange of best practice for elected members and officers.

I have attended meetings of the CEMR on behalf of the Independent Group along with representatives of each political group and each devolved assembly. CEMR meets twice a year but last June I was appointed 'spokesperson' on waste and environment and have also attended meetings alongside COP21 in Paris and the waste experts group in Brussels.

This is a particularly important year for consultation on the Circular Economy package as we move from the idea of production, use and then waste to a circular system where the original design of a product takes into consideration its end of life, whether it is reused, repaired or recycled. Producers are being asked to take more responsibility not only for the design but also the consequences of their products and contribute to the cost of collection and disposal. We see this with some products like tyres where the customer pays to have the old tyres collected and many furniture and white goods companies that take away packaging and old washing machines. These schemes need to be extended to take the pressure off local authorities and tax payers.

Other areas being discussed are the collection and quality of bio waste and green waste, methods of calculation and the role of landfill and energy from waste plants in the future.

I recently attended the CEMR conference 'Tomorrow starts today' and moderated a workshop on the Circular Economy package. This covered the whole life cycle of a product from production to consumption through waste management and the market for secondary raw materials. I also reported on the CEMR's key points to the policy committee as we are anxious to get the role of local authorities at the forefront of any new proposals on the collection and disposal of waste and ensure that there is a better balance of responsibilities of all organisations involved.

I was also asked to give evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Environment on the Circular Economy package and the key points of consideration for the CEMR.

Congress of the Council of Europe

As an alternate member of the Congress I have attended two plenary sessions which have been dominated by discussions on asylum seekers and refugees, people trafficking, and exploitation.

It is of particular interest that the Congress has started inviting youth delegates from each country to their plenary sessions. These young people are engaged in politics at home and enter into the debates with enthusiasm and are well received by members who see their contribution as very positive.

I am also a member of the Monitoring Committee which reports on elections across the 52 member states of the Council of Europe. This has met twice this year and while I have not been part of a monitoring visit I have been present when the members report back which is very enlightening. Recent elections in Albania had been observed and monitored. The committee also heard representations from Belgium, the Netherlands and Ukraine on issues related to compliance with The European Charter of Local Self-Government. This is interesting as local authorities are questioning the role of the national government possibly interfering in decisions that should be made locally. In the case of the Netherlands there was concern the government was deciding planning applications for large infrastructure projects (windfarms) without sufficient regard to local opinion.



Committee of Regions

Councillor Andrew Cooper

Kirklees Council

When I commenced my role as a member of the UK Delegation on the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR), I described it as like getting to know a whole new council with its own culture, rules and ways of making it effective. That description pretty much is how it has been and I enjoy the role as it's fresh and interesting and it adds a different dimension to my councillor role. Having just been re-elected for the fifth time it is good to get a bit of variety in your work.

The CoR is the representative body of local and devolved government in the European Union. As the LGA Independent Group representative on the UK Delegation I am one of 24 representatives from across the UK that are balanced across political parties and spread across the UK. The chief output of the CoR are 'opinions' which inform EU policy development and mirror, from a local government perspective many of the same issues being considered by the European Commission and the European Parliament. My principal role at the CoR is on the ENVE Commission that is responsible for Environment, Energy, Climate Change and Space Policy. Our work this year has focussed on a number of areas including the European Energy Union which aims to ensure security of energy supplies and greater independence from countries outside the EU for energy supply. Naturally the focus I am placing on this is the need for greater energy efficiency and renewable energy policies and investment.

The most notable initiative I have made at the CoR has been to call for a proportion of the fines on car manufacturers, who have falsified emissions tests, to be given to local authorities. These funds could then be used on local transport initiatives that provide sustainable transport alternatives to polluting vehicles that negatively impact on the local environment and public health.

My initiative on this resulted in the following statement from the ENVE Commission of the CoR on the automotive emission tests' scandal

'The ongoing scandal of certain car manufactures cheating on vehicles (diesel and petrol powered cars) emissions' tests is a matter of great concern for local and regional authorities, as those most affected by these situation are the people living in our towns and cities who breathe in these emissions with serious impact on their health. It has also become clear that similarly misleading information on CO2 emissions has been provided by certain manufacturers, which risks undermining our efforts at combatting climate change.

The ENVE commission members welcome the fact that new test cycles which are based on real-world driving conditions will finally be introduced at the EU level, but they wish to express their deep disappointment that national governments in the Council of Ministers have decided to still allow car manufacturers to exceed more than two times the emission limits required by EU law as of 2017, when testing will have to be moved from laboratories to roads. The ENVE members believe this relaxation of rules should not be accepted, as the CoR has previously underlined the crucial importance of addressing air quality problems at source.

Poor air quality is responsible for approximately 400,000 premature deaths in the EU ever year and has a disproportionately severe impact on the health of people with respiratory or cardiovascular conditions, the very young and elderly people.

As representatives of local communities and regions, ENVE members strive to ensure public health of our citizens and we expect national governments and the EU level to do the same and not tolerate fraudulent practises which cause serious harm to our citizens. We also believe that appropriate forms of compensation must be paid by companies found to be responsible and that local authorities should receive a fair share of such compensation for the damages their citizens suffer, and to enable cities and regions to better implement clean-air programmes.'



Fire Services Management Committee

Councillor Philip Howson

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Authority

The LGA Representative Cllr Philip Howson, Chairman of East Sussex Fire Authority, attends the Fire Customer Group, jointly chaired by CFOA and Home Office (Fire) to actively engage in the ESN programme on behalf of all fire authorities across England.

The three main procurements for the programme are now complete and contracts have been signed to provide User Transition (Kellog, Brown and Root), User Services (Motorola) and Network Services (EE). Each of the three main suppliers are now engaging with the programme and the requirement for fire and rescue services to respond to programme demands will increase as we enter the mobilisation phase.

As ever, key to full engagement with the programme will be the funding provided by the Government to support the transition through to go live. All of the core elements of the network will be centrally funded and this will include network connections and the devices essential to provide critical voice and data communications.

Fire and rescue services were provided, via the Fire Customer Group and the supporting Regional Transition groups, with confirmation of the amount of funding that will be provided on a regional basis to support transition resources. Home Office Fire Policy has indicated that this funding should be arriving with transitional lead authorities by the end of June and will be provided to align with the expected activity within each region dependent upon their position in the rollout order. This will mean that in most cases the funding will commence in this financial year, but with the majority provided in 2017/18 where most work will be undertaken, though the total size of the grants remains as previously notified.

In recent months the existing communications provider, Airwave Services Limited, has been acquired by Motorola. As Motorola are a supplier for ESN this has helped to significantly de-risk the transition phase and allowed alignment of end dates for the emergency service contracts to the end of 2019.

This change in ownership will also assist in a smoother transition through the provision of an improved inter-working solution which will allow improved connectivity between the current and new networks, as well as potentially providing access to existing Airwave sites in rural areas to support the Extended Area Services programme.

Some key areas of work will commence shortly including the finalisation of the connection requirements between control rooms and the network. Devices will also start to be considered in the coming months as preparations ramp up.

It is also expected that the process of preparing for contract signature by individual fire authorities will commence shortly and that the Fire Customer (Fire Finance) Sub-Group, will be heavily involved in this particular aspect.

It may also be of interest to know that the National Audit Office is undertaking an oversight study of the programme to consider how the existing system meets user needs and how these will be met by the new system. They will also seek to understand how the Home Office is engaging, consulting and keeping users and stakeholders updated. A number of key members of CFOA and the Fire Customer Group have been, or will be invited to take part in this study.



National Lead Member Peer

Councillor Mike Haines

Teignbridge District Council

My fellow lead member peers and I have continued to give support and advice when required by Independent Group members in England and Wales, and we have endeavoured to be proactive in engaging with our members.

The Independent Group ran its second 'Next Generation' programme for future leaders from our group. This involved three, two-day weekend residential modules at Warwick Conference Centre attended by 15 councillors that had been nominated by leaders/colleagues at their councils (look out for the next invitation for nominations in September). The feedback from this and last year's programme has been very encouraging. This year's programme was also memorable for the three babies (participant's and facilitators') expected around the end of the modules!

As a regional peer my involvement has included: liaising with an Independent Group which saw a significant growth in members following the elections in May 2015; trying to help resolve an ongoing disagreement between members in an Independent Group; support for a lone Independent that had left a party group; advice relating to inappropriate details in a political party election leaflet; advice on planning issues; advice on protocol with other political groups in a council. The number of member problems arising from tweeting that have come to my attention has been less than last year, I hope this shows a greater realisation by members of the potential consequences of certain instant comments.

I have participated as a team member in a HMEP (Highways) Peer Challenge at a Labour controlled unitary authority, and a Corporate Peer Challenge at a Conservative controlled district council with Independent 'opposition.' I have also been part of a Planning

Committee Peer Challenge at an Independent controlled unitary authority and have participated in other member support work with PAS (Planning Advisory Service).

At Local Government House there have been meetings with lead peer colleagues and with Cllr Marianne Overton and Cllr Shirley Pannell as well as update briefings with Carl. Noleen has kept me updated with appointments of our peers for mentoring and peer challenge. There was a Peer Accreditation event in February, and this increased the number (by about a dozen) of Independent Group accredited peers available to participate in mentoring, etc. This gives us new perspectives and replaces those that have recently retired. Hopefully new and existing peers will all have opportunities to be involved in sector-led improvement in the coming year, although the amount of peer work coming to Independent Group peers is still less than we would like to see.



Regional Lead Peer

Councillor Colin Mann

Caerphilly County Borough Council

A source of expert free confidential advice from colleagues who have many years of experience as councillors. This is the offer to all councillors who are members of the LGA Independent Group. As well as Independents the group includes members of parties who are not Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat, eg Greens, UKIP and Plaid Cymru. The offer applies to individual members or groups of councillors.

I felt that it is worth re-stating the above as far too many members of the Independent Group do not seem to be aware that this is the case and are often pleasantly surprised to find that there is a source of information and advice at the other end of a phone call or email, or on a face-to-face basis.

My area for the past 12 months has been London and the South-East of England, as far west as the Isle of Wight.

My main advice activity has been with individual members and to a lesser extent with groups. Members often feel that they need clarification on advice or guidance given locally. This may be because the advice does not maybe conform to their own interpretation of a situation or to make comparisons with how things work elsewhere. One thing that is apparent is that ways of working vary tremendously between individual councils. There are very many ways of interpreting general guidance.

Our members are quite often in a minority situation with the council being controlled by a party group and one of the common themes is that people feel at times that advice they receive locally may not be as neutral as it should be, which can put members at a disadvantage. This could of course be due to previous practice

in an authority or due to undue pressure being exerted by leading members of a controlling group.

I have regularly attended the group improvement sessions at Local Government House. I feel that if more of our members were aware of how useful these sessions are the attendance would improve substantially. One particularly session often comes to mind. I think that most of us at present are experiencing difficulties caused by central government pressure to build vast numbers of houses. In this particular session many members, from various areas, were complaining about being told to build thousands of houses in places where there were already thousands of unemployed residents living locally.

I recently attended the south west Regional meeting in Bristol. One of the items on the agenda was the City Region deals which are being promoted by Westminster. There are common themes. For example, many areas, but not all, have agreed to accept an elected mayor. I believe that everyone present appreciated the presentation by Cllr Julian German who gave details of the agreement in Cornwall. This had been negotiated over a number of years and I think illustrated the value in thorough preparation to reach agreed aims prior to negotiating with central government.

The recent elections did bring some opportunities for Independent groups. At the time of writing a combination of residents' association councillors are looking reach an agreement with Lib Dems on Elmbridge Borough Council in Surrey, which would give them control of the authority.

To conclude I would like thank Marianne, our group leader and all the staff in the Group office – Carl, Vanessa and Noleen, for their support and for the very efficient way that they deal with questions and issues when they arise.



Regional Lead Peer

Councillor Graham Brown

Powys County Borough Council

This last year has seen improvements in my Region (North West, West Midlands and Wales) in the approach to Peer work and the identification of where we may be able to offer help and support. I also believe the opportunities for members to engage are improving and I am optimistic that Peer Mentoring and Corporate Peer Challenges are being embraced by more Councillors/Councils as a vehicle to identify opportunities to look at what they do, how they do it and whether it can be done differently or more efficiently.

In both the North West and West Midlands, regular meetings now take place with Regional Offices and Regional Lead Peers which I find to be the right way forward as we all get to hear what is going on in our Regions and identify any areas where we may be able to promote what the LGA has to offer. Another innovation in both Regions this year is the organising of New Councillor Induction days which have been arranged for the post-election period. I am very hopeful the newly-elected Councillors will find great benefit from these events, particularly in being introduced to the LGA and its work from the very start of their political role in local government.

There have also been two very successful days organised in the West Midlands, one in Birmingham for all parties where I was the Independent Panellist for one of the sessions and the other was for Independent members which took place in the historic Herefordshire town of Bromyard. In respect of Conferences and Regional meetings, I cannot urge members enough to attend these events as, not only do they deliver a great deal of information, they are great for networking and talking to members from other authorities – you'll find we all face the same problems but how they are managed varies greatly.

In Wales, the Independents took a major step and formed an Association of Welsh Independents and fielded Regional List candidates in the Welsh Assembly elections. The candidates attracted a very respectable number of votes but failed to win a seat. The Association will now be concentrating on next years' elections when all-out elections will be held throughout Wales.

In addition to the above, there has been contact with a number of different individual councils and Councillors but, for obvious reasons, details cannot be given. What can be given, however, are my thanks to Councillor Marianne Overton, Leader of the LGA's Independent Group, Councillor Mike Haines, National Lead Peer for the Independent Group and my fellow Regional Lead Peers for their help and support throughout the year. My thanks to Carl, Vanessa and Noleen in the Independent Group Office for all their help and support also.



Regional Lead Peer

Apu Bagchi

Former Councillor – Bedford Borough Council

The past year has been busy for Independent members in relation to their involvement and commitment to their work as councillors, although it has been a relatively quieter year in terms of peer review activities. We have received fewer individual complaints/queries than in the previous year. It is possible that many of our Independent members – particularly in the eastern region - have established themselves well and do not require too much help or support in carrying out their duties as councillors.

We had two formal meetings for our Independent members – one in Ely and the other in Chelmsford. Both meetings were attended by the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Independent Group as well as senior LGA officers. The meetings were very constructive and raised a number of issues. It was quite clear that many of our Independent members were unaware and unclear of the role of the LGA. They receive very little information about the LGA and felt unsure how to resolve or deal with difficult and conflicting situation in their respective council.

It has been a great pleasure and privilege to have worked as a lead peer for the Independent Group of the LGA. I would like to thank my other Lead Peer members who have provided much needed services to other regions. I would also like to take this opportunity of thanking the leadership and Independent Group colleagues for their enthusiastic support and hard work over these years.

The officers have also been fantastic with their professional support and guidance. This has all helped to make my 10 years with the LGA interesting and enjoyable. I leave with fond memories and wish Independent members every success.



In memory of Councillor John Northcott

In March 2016 we were very sad to hear that Cllr John Northcott had passed away.

John was a Member of Mole Valley District Council, representing the Ashted Common Ward as an Independent Member, from May 2000 to March 2016. In addition to his district councillor role, John was a very distinguished Chairman of the Council in 2010/11; Chairman of the Development Control Committee from 2004-2006 and again for a short period in 2012, and he was the Executive Member with responsibility for Planning from 2012-2015.

John was an active and well-respected Independent Member of the LGA where he was the Deputy Chair of the Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board between September 2014 and December 2015.

John was a very remarkable man who has played a significant role in improving lives of our residents. He was both a good team player, supporting others and a determined advocate, achieving a great deal for his community. John played a key role at the LGA where he influenced government legislation and supported our councillors across England and Wales.

John leaves a hole and is much missed.

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