

The Independent Group

Annual Report 2022/23



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Group Leader's year in review



Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

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

What a year we've had for testing our skills and experience to keep a steady ship and support our councils and councillors in troubled times. A big part of our work is to improve funding and legislation, so five secretaries of state and three prime ministers created significant turbulence. We were quick to take opportunities to restate our position on the key issues we face, to good effect. We are working on post-COVID-19 economic recovery in local communities, the cost of living crisis, struggling local services, the continued impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and our councils providing the fundamentals for the influx of asylum seekers. We still have significant challenges ahead and will need to work together nationally to succeed.

Thank you to members and council leaders who engaged in our think tanks and fortnightly meetings online, correspondence, workshops and conferences. I raised your issues directly with ministers in my fortnightly meetings with Lord Harrington on refugees, on all issues with the secretaries of state for Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), Michael Gove and others, with some good results.

As I write this, the Illegal Migration Bill continues its journey in Parliament, aimed at the 45,000 asylum seekers, not the far more significant numbers from many other non-European countries, invited in for work, as students or refugees. On behalf of the group, our members have pointed out the impact on our local services and housing and called for some changes in the legislation and funding to match.

As leader of the Independent Group, I have supported and advocated from the outset the LGA's Civility in Public Life work and am co-chair of the Civility in Public Life Steering Group. As such, our Group has been instrumental in the development of the LGA's 'Debate not Hate' campaign, which we launched at last year's annual conference. At last year's conference we also heard that the Civility in Public Life programme won the Civility in Politics Bridge Builders of the Year Award. The LGA's survey found that a staggering seven out of 10 councillors have suffered abuse in their role. The campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation. I was part of the launch of the Debate not Hate toolkit in the House of Lords and over 600 councillors have signed up to the declaration and used the toolkit. Furthermore, new research with recommendations is being published, drawn together by the Civility in Public Life Steering Group which I co-chair. I also presented this work to the UK Local Government Associations' Forum, which brings together the local government associations from England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and to local government across Europe through the Council of European Municipalities (CEMR), representing some 130,000 councils. It is an honour to have been the spokesperson for the LGA and for our Group on this initiative to which our members have contributed and is of both local and international interest.

A highlight of the year for me was the opportunity to meet so many of you and to contribute to the various conferences through the year, including the Independent Annual Conference, the Green Party Conferences, the Plaid Cymru Conferences and the District Council Network annual conference, and to contribute; Independent, Green Party and Plaid Cymru and District Council Network.

Congratulations to all our councillors elected in May, at the first election at which Photo ID was required nationwide, despite cross-party objection. In the elections, we made significant gains across the country with 1,445 councillors elected (964 Independent and 481 Green). Our members took control of several councils on their own or working with others. With over 100 councils in no overall control, our members are able to play a significant part, either in control or in opposition, sometimes running the council from the back seat. The increasing number of councils in no overall control demonstrates the strength of councils that have Independent, Green and Plaid Cymru councillors. The gains also demonstrate the impact of what we can deliver and do to support communities in turbulent times.

Group successes

As always, our member peers have done an excellent job supporting our members. It was wonderful to join our lively and effective Independent peers at the LGA Member Peer Conference in Sheffield. The conference was a great opportunity to hear about some of the important peer work the LGA does for councils, sharing notable practice and cost-saving initiatives, as well as improving the performance of councils.

We held another positive and motivational Independent Group Conference in October 2022. It was inspiring to see you forming such valuable connections and networks with each other. We also heard from a wide variety of speakers including Lord Richard Best OBE DL, Professor Tony Travers of the London School of Economics, Vicky Pryce, Kate Ogden and Baroness Natalie Bennett.

This year, we also hosted our own online Candidate School, which included excellent sessions as part of a series of nine events. Councillors and guest speakers shared their advice and experiences covering all aspects of standing as a councillor to getting elected. We covered a broad range of topics including campaigning and communications, social media, canvassings and key issues in local government.

Thank you

Thanks to Paul Woodhead, who has stepped down this year as the group's treasurer. Particular thanks to Mike Haines who has worked with the LGA for over 20 years, serving our group on LGA policy boards, on our executive and as our National Lead Peer. Mike has given thoughtful advice and guidance to our councillors, especially on our successful Next Generation programme.

Thank you to my Deputy, Councillor Hannah Dalton, Treasurer Paul Woodhead and executive members who represent our regions and drive our work. Thank you to our LGA peers and lead members for your thoughtful contributions and leadership on our boards, on top of local commitments; and to all our members involved in our think tanks which help shape our group's policy positions. Thanks also to our council leaders, deputy leaders and portfolio holders.



LGA Independent Group budget report



Councillor Paul Woodhead

Cannock Chase District Council
Treasurer

In the period April 2022–March 2023 the Independent Group spent £27,828 of our £30,695 budget.

This year we spent money on:

- hosting some meetings and events – including the Independent Group Conference
- staff training and temporary staff costs
- conference bookings.

This is the first year with a full post-COVID spend without travel restrictions and as in-person meetings resumed. The cost of living crisis has impacted on our core costs. For example, the average price of a hotel booking, travel and conference booking has generally increased in line with inflation.

Looking forward to the forthcoming year, we have a budget availability of £32,759 for the year. This will cover our annual conference in the autumn, member meetings and events, regional meetings, workshops and training, social media, resource development and some research.

LGA Independent Group board members

Children and Young People Board

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Safer and Stronger Communities Board

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An update from our lead member peers



Councillor Mike Haines

Teignbridge District Council
National Lead Member Peer

Independent Group peers give support and advice to our members across England. We have seven regional lead peers:

Councillor Mike Haines

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

Councillor Sue Baxter

Regional Lead Peer: West Midlands and North West

Councillor Jo Beavis

Regional Lead Peer: East England and East Midlands

Councillor Andrew Cooper

Regional Lead Peer: Green Members

Councillor Paul Cullen

Regional Lead Peer: North East and Yorkshire and Humberside

Councillor Linda Gillham

Regional Lead Peer: South East and London

Councillor Zoe Nicholson

Regional Lead Peer: Green Members

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 including negotiating the 96 no overall control (NOC) councils after the May 2023 elections; leadership support and mentoring; advice on policy issues; and advice on protocols. There have been hybrid / virtual meetings for regional peers as part of the LGA's sector improvement discussions.

Our peers were able to meet in person again at the LGA's Annual Conference in Harrogate and Peer Conference in Sheffield.

In addition to our regional peers, we have a strong pool of 37 member peers who have supported councillors in various ways. This year, LGA peers have undertaken two Corporate Peer Challenges, one planning policy and planning application and one strategic care and health peer challenge. The team has provided one-to-one mentoring support and advice in areas including budgetsetting, social care and regeneration, as well as co-facilitating workshops on issues such as prevention and health, children's services, governance review, bespoke development support, planning, finance and budget support, new councillor inductions, equality, diversity and inclusion training sessions, and recovery and renewal panels.

Next Generation programme

I helped facilitate the Independent Group's ninth Next Generation programme for future leaders. This involves three weekend residential modules in Warwick. 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 Independent Group and the LGA more widely.

You may be aware that, after 36 years as a councillor, I retired this May. Adam Paynter has been appointed as the National Lead Peer, and Jim McKenna as the South West Regional Lead Peer for the Independent Group. Both are from Cornwall so, while they may put jam on their scones first, I don't think this will prevent them from doing an excellent job in their new roles from September.

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

LGA Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC)



Councillor Frank Biederman

North Devon District Council

Chairman LGA FSMC and Fire Commission

It's been my absolute pleasure to represent the group on the LGA Fire Services Management Committee and Fire Commission as Chairman since September. I took over from Councillor Ian Stephens who had done a brilliant job over four years for our group, bringing it back together so we are a joint cross-party voice to central Government on the many issues facing fire and rescue services (FRSs). It was my firm ambition to continue this and to expand it to other partners involved in the running and improvement of the fire sector.

The first task was to put together a work programme – with the cross-party lead members of the FSMC and the wider Fire Commission informing our work and priorities.

The priorities reflect the issues which are of key importance to our members and the sector.

We agreed our new priorities in September. Our priorities mirror the themes from the Government's white paper of:

- people
- professionalism
- governance.

We also added two new priorities:

- sector-led improvement
- climate change.

These themes also pick up issues identified through inspection.

People

The LGA is committed to supporting the sector to improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the sector. Our main route to doing this is with our EDI Champions Network. The network is chaired by Jane Hugo, our Equalities Advocate, and supports members to drive improvement in EDI at a local level. The Core Code of Ethics has also been jointly published by the LGA, National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) and The Association Of Police And Crime Commissioners (APCC), following the recommendation from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). We will continue to work jointly to embed the code.

Professionalism

The LGA has undertaken extensive work on building safety, working with the NFCC to support the establishment of the new regime and to ensure that the remediation of existing buildings is appropriately supported. We are working jointly with the NFCC to make the case for further flexibility around council tax for Fire Rescue Authorities (FRAs) as well as lobbying for sustainable funding for FRAs.

Governance

The LGA continues to believe it should be for local areas to determine how they should be governed. As with levelling up, real change and improvement will be more successful if local councils and fire and rescue services are empowered to decide what their local governance structure will be, based on the needs of communities. We will continue to support our members in their governance role.

Sector-led improvement

The LGA can play a key role in providing support to the sector through sector-led improvement.

We will continue to make the case for this with Government, who currently do not provide funding for sector-led improvement in fire.

Climate change

We have already seen the impact of climate change on the sector, with wildfires and flooding incidents, and the likelihood is that these will increase. The LGA highlighted these issues in our white paper response and will continue to do so.

We continue to work jointly with the NFCC and the National Employers (England) on Fit for the Future, working on the implementation of the improvement objectives. We are pleased that this work has been acknowledged by the inspectorate.

We are also working very closely with the NFCC, the Home Office and HMICFRS on tackling the issues raised following the Independent Culture Review by Nazir Afzal on the London Fire Brigade. It became very apparent, quickly, that this was not just a London problem, with HMIFRS finding issues of poor culture across services up and down the country.

I have attended the Fire Performance Over Group (FPOG) alongside colleagues from HMICFRS, the Home Office and the NFCC who are currently monitoring the progress of services that have not made sufficient progress following inspections. I have also spoken at the HMICFRS Fire Chiefs event on the role of councillors and the Fire Services Management Committee.

“It’s been a very busy, but also a very rewarding, experience so far”



The LGA held a very good Fire Conference in Nottingham in March, with a theme throughout of our main priorities as laid out above, but particularly focusing on culture and climate change.

I have been involved in pay negotiations with the National Joint Council (NJC) employers' side on successfully agreeing a pay deal with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) for firefighters. This involved many meetings and late nights to get it over the line. The next problem will be continuing to lobby Government for is more funding and, particularly, for fire and rescue services to have Council Tax flexibility, which we managed to get this year by having a united, cross-party voice. This will be critical for nearly all fire and rescue services to remain sustainable and without affecting frontline service delivery.

Lead members recently visited North Yorkshire FRS in York to better understand the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner's role in fire governance and how it is working. It's my observation that no governance model is the silver bullet in what drives an improving service, and this supports the view of the LGA that the white paper should allow each local area to decide the best operating model for them – it is those who are responsible for fire and rescue services that will make it a success, not a governance model.

I will finish there but would be pleased to hear from Independent Group members, on or off fire and rescue authorities, about issues or concerns you are facing at your authority. Now that the group office is back up to capacity it is our intention to set up a think tank for fire so that we can better reach out to you all.

I would like to thank Abigail and the officers at the LGA for their support in my first year as Chairman. It's been a very busy, but also a very rewarding, experience so far.

Children and Young People Board



Councillor Julie Fallon

Conwy County Borough Council
Deputy Chair

I have thoroughly enjoyed my role as Deputy Chair of the Children and Young People Board, where we have responsibility for Local Government Association (LGA) activity on the wellbeing of children and young people, including education, social care, health and early years.

The objectives of the board are to:

- support and promote the council role in achieving better outcomes for children 0 to 19
- articulate and promote a strong strategic role for councils in education, ensuring they have adequate powers and funding to meet their educational responsibilities
- develop and influence proposals to improve support and protection for vulnerable children
- support councils to deliver consistently good outcomes for all local children
- influence the delivery and commissioning of public health services that promote the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The last year has continued to be challenging with the aftermath of COVID-19, the continual changes of national Government and the response to refugees and asylum-seekers; in particular, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). The board has met with several ministers to find a joined-up approach to these and many issues.

Some of the key areas of focus of the board over the last 12 months have been:

SEND Review

The Department for Education (DfE) published the SEND green paper, SEND Review: right support, right place, right time. The green paper sets out several proposals that seek to improve outcomes for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) via reforms to the SEND system. Will Quince MP, Minister for Children and Families, attended the board meeting to discuss the proposals set out in the green paper in more detail. This discussion provided an opportunity for members to discuss those proposals, with that feedback informing the LGA's response to the green paper.

Independent Review of Children's Social Care

The board looked at the report which set out recommendations and an initial LGA view on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care report. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was published on 23 May 2022 and included the following key points:

- **family help** – ensuring children and families receive support as soon as they need it, driven by an investment of £2 billion
- **child protection** – introducing an 'expert child protection practitioner' role, an experienced social worker to co-work child protection cases with family help social workers
- **data** – a taskforce dedicated to achieving 'frictionless sharing of information' between council and partner systems and improving case management systems
- **family networks** – improving support for kinship carers and introducing a legal right for all families to access family group decision-making
- **children in care** – improving placements through the introduction of up to 20 'regional care cooperatives', owned and run by councils, which would commission and manage all placements
- **care leavers** – extending corporate parenting to other public sector bodies; making care experience a protected characteristic; and improving outcomes in relation to relationships, education, housing, employment and health
- **multi-agency safeguarding** – clarifying the role and improving the transparency of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements
- **improvement** – Ofsted inspections to increase transparency in how judgements are made and consider more how families as a whole are supported.

Following the discussion, the following comments were made:

Supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Councils have a responsibility to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) who are identified in their area. As this disproportionately affects port authorities, the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) has been established to move children from the area where they are first identified to care placements around the country. Exceptionally high numbers of arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children into the UK via small boats have, in 2021 and 2022 in particular, placed the NTS under enormous strain, with significant numbers of children currently placed in hotels while they await transfer. Changes to the NTS have been announced to try to ensure children can transfer to their new homes more quickly, however councils are clear that these changes fail to address the challenges within the NTS that are hampering the process.

I am one of the representatives that sits on the working group, working with members and the Government to build on the shared ambitions for unaccompanied children. We have had regular meetings with ministers. Placement capacity and workforce capacity were highlighted as key areas to address.

City Regions Board



Councillor Gillian Ford

London Borough of Havering
Deputy Chair

Over the last LGA board year, the City and Regions Board has been operating under a themed model of work and reporting.

Theme 1 – Future of Cities

This theme culminated in the commissioning of interview-based films where people in communities were asked their perspectives and experiences of living in their respective cities and what their aspirations were for their area. This expanded on the 'Future of Cities' collection launched at the 2022 LGA Annual Conference. The second successful Urban Summit was held at Smith Square at the beginning of 2023. Speakers included Andy Haldane, Chief Executive, RSA; Dr Miatta Fahnbulleh, Chief Executive, New Economics Foundation; Lord Nat Wei; Gertrude Rose Gamwera, Secretary General, East Africa Local Government Association; Bruce Katz, urban policy expert; and Jared Banks, Environment, Science, Technology and Health Counselor, US Embassy.

Theme 2 – Levelling up

The board identified, early on, the inability and lack of expertise at the local level to submit bids for funding and that geography was not as significant as the need. 'Work local' continued to develop and undertook a refresh, with the board wanting to get an understanding of the role of councils and combined authorities inequalities in skills and employment.

Theme 3 – Urban resilience

This theme targeted the challenges and opportunities facing leaders in urban areas looking to build resilient communities. Heat resilience and the National Resilience Framework were considered, joining up the strands from across the LGA Safer Stronger Communities, and Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Boards. The board received a presentation from Bristol on the Heat Resilience Plan and their Keep Bristol Cool mapping tool.

Theme 4 – Green jobs

This theme included focusing on retrofitting needs to deliver net zero, tackle the cost-of-living crisis and fuel poverty. A qualified workforce was a necessity in delivering at scale and pace and required a localised, place-based approach which fed into the 'Work Local' study. The work programme included updates from the 'skills for retrofit and green jobs' delivery group, and the 'local capacity' sub-group.

“I also had the pleasure of representing the board on the Cost of Living Advisory Board, and the Health and Devolution Working Group chaired by NHS Confederation’s Michael Wood”

Theme 5 – Growth funding

The board identified the immediacy of ensuring vital local services can keep pace with rising inflation and increased demand from residents and a need to ensure councils can boost productivity and strengthen sustainable and inclusive growth across the country. Discussions included the cross-cutting role economic development teams have in promoting prosperity. They are non-statutory and will be wholly dependent on budgets, resources, and overall strategy. Changing national agendas impact on place-based ability to embrace growth. The constant application process to try and access multiple funding streams disadvantages localities that have less funding and resources available for them to submit application bids. The board continues to call for a streamlined funding pot model, which would provide greater equity across the country. The board also commissioned Shared Intelligence to undertake analysis on economic development services – how they are delivered across England, the breadth of work undertaken, the value they add, the skills and capacity challenges within the system and what support teams needed.

I also had the pleasure of representing the Board on the Cost of Living Advisory Board, and the Health and Devo Working Group chaired by NHS Confederation’s Michael Wood. I represented the LGA on several occasions, including speaking at two all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs) – on fiscal devolution, and youth employment.

Community Wellbeing Board



Councillor Rosemary Sexton

Solihull Borough Council
Member

Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) formally came into being on 1 July 2022. The LGA has played a part in contributing to the guidance for ICSs, and in making the case for local authorities to be seen as full partners in these organisations rather than as subsidiaries to the NHS. We have made the case for local place-based working with decisions being taken by those as close as possible to the communities they represent.

We contributed to the Hewitt Review of Integrated Care Systems with examples of good practice, and how local authorities can contribute to the Government's stated aim of focusing on population health and the prevention of ill-health.

We've followed with some concern the moving goalposts around the Government's social care agenda. This has led to great uncertainty around when (or if), promised reforms will be introduced, and whether the funding provided to local authorities will be adequate to cover them. We have lobbied for more investment in social care, to redress the shortfall in recent years and to put the system on a sustainable footing. We know that social care services are in many areas struggling to recruit staff and meet demand, and that this is having a knock-on effect on the NHS. However, we have also made it clear that social care is about much more than just hospital discharges, and that we need to promote awareness of the many ways in which this vital service can and should be helping residents live meaningful lives.

“I was particularly excited to be asked to lead a session of the LGA / Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) Annual Public Health Conference on active travel and its benefits for communities”

We have also taken a close interest in the Government's assurance framework for adult social care services. Our view was that introducing additional burdens in the form of inspections was unlikely to be helpful for a sector that was already having to deal with a lot of changes in a short time; but given the insistence from government we have offered feedback and support to local authority adult social care departments to try and make the process as constructive as possible.

Community Wellbeing Board members have been vocal about our concerns that the Government's abandonment of the promised 10-year mental health strategy in favour of a "major conditions strategy" may lead to decreased focus on mental health and that younger people in particular may find themselves side-lined by the wider strategy.

Public health funding was in the news again this year, with the announcement of the public health grant once again delayed significantly. We were involved in raising awareness about the impact of this for local councils, and the important work that local public health departments do.

On a personal note, I've been proud to take the lead for the Community Wellbeing Board on suicide prevention as it is a topic that's close to my heart. On behalf of the board I've attended meetings of the APPG on suicide and self-harm and the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group. I've chaired webinars on supporting suicide prevention work by local councils and helped to promote the LGA's suicide prevention programme.

Among the webinars that I've chaired, I was particularly excited to be asked to lead a session of the LGA / Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) Annual Public Health Conference on active travel and its benefits for communities including contributions by leading experts including Chris Boardman MBE.

As lead members, we are often asked for feedback on documents that are produced or co-produced by the LGA. I've taken a particular interest in some of the guidance about autism and learning disabilities and used the opportunity to feed back comments from autistic people. This led to some helpful revisions being made.

This has been a busy year for the board. This brief review has only covered a few major topic areas and some personal highlights, but there has been a lot more work behind the scenes. I've been grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this over the last few years.

Culture, Tourism and Sport



Councillor Geoff Knight

Lancaster City Council
Vice Chairman

Culture

The Commission on Culture and Local Government was set up in early 2022 to investigate the role of local, publicly funded culture in supporting our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. As we move towards recovery, we face a whole set of new challenges; a cost of living crisis; global instability; pressure on public services; rising inequalities and climate change. The commission's report tested four propositions about local culture, including libraries, archives, museums, heritage, the arts, parks, and the creative industries. A successful launch event was then held at the Local Government Association in December with Lord Parkinson, Minister for Arts and Heritage, in attendance.

In September, the Minister for Arts and Heritage announced a new public libraries strategy with the aim of building upon previous strategies. The LGA co-chairs the Libraries Taskforce, which developed a series of toolkits and guidance with the aim of building upon and adding to existing good practice and partnerships. It also promoted libraries to potential funders and helped to set out a strong and coherent narrative around the contribution of public libraries to the community. The board has also promoted the important role that libraries play as warm spaces for the community.

“As we move towards recovery, we face a whole set of new challenges; a cost of living crisis; global instability; pressure on public services; rising inequalities; and climate change”

Arts Council England (ACE) provided the board with an overview of their National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding round. This followed the Government's Levelling Up White Paper confirming 100 per cent of ACE's budget uplift for this year must be spent outside of London. This was understandably unpopular with some of our colleagues,

in particular, the decision around the future of the English National Opera (ENO). The extra funding was, however, welcomed in many of the regions with struggling culture organisations around the country benefitting from much-needed financial support.

Tourism

The board met with VisitEngland to discuss its new main priorities. Following on from a 2021 review of the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) landscape in England, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) announced in November 2022 a pilot scheme to test this new restructuring of DMOs across selected local authorities. The intention is to extend tourist seasons and attract more visitors from both home and abroad.

Sport

The past year has presented new challenges for the Culture Tourism and Sport Board. Having recently put the COVID-19 crisis behind us, we now find ourselves in a cost of living crisis. As a result, local government is facing a significant funding gap. According to a freedom of information (FOI) request by Ukactive, councils have lost 65 swimming pools in the past three years and estimate that 40 per cent of public leisure facilities will cease operation within the year without further financial support. In our official response to the Government's Autumn Statement, we said that it was disappointing that the support for non-domestic energy consumers will not include public sector organisations beyond the end of March 2023, and we urged the Government to consider the impact of rising energy prices on councils as part of their review. Lead members subsequently sent a letter to Jeremy Hunt MP and Michael Gove MP about their decision to exclude swimming pools and leisure centres under the Energy Bills Discount Scheme. There then followed a meeting between the board and the Sports Minister, Rt Hon Stuart Andrew MP, in which we addressed our concerns. It was, therefore, welcome news in the Spring Budget when the Chancellor announced that the discount scheme was now to be extended to swimming pools and leisure centres with £20 million earmarked for energy help and a further £40 million earmarked for energy-saving measures.

In December, the board met with a representative of the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) to talk about breaking down barriers for underserved, lower socio-economic groups. The LTA has agreed to look at other under-represented communities as part of its overall ambition to ensure that tennis reflects the diversity of local communities. A report from the Chiles Webster Batson Commission on sport and low-income neighbourhoods is also ongoing. Its objective is to identify, highlight and amplify the voices of community-based sports organisations.

As always, it's a pleasure and a privilege to represent our group on the board. Thank you to Julie Jones-Evans, my Independent Group colleagues, and Independent Group office staff for all their help and input.

Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board



Councillor Loic Rich

Cornwall Council
Deputy Chair

It's great to have the opportunity to help shape LGA priorities across local authority aspirations for active travel, housing standards, climate change, recycling, and driving forward ambitions for green economic growth and skills.

I am grateful to fellow board member Cllr Diana Moore who has provided excellent input into the work of the board as well as substitute board members Cllr Ed Gemmel, Cllr Paul Hilliard, and Cllr Phil Jordan. All of this is backed up by some very capable and diligent officers who report to the board and very keen to both answer questions and follow up requests for information.

“It's great to have the opportunity to help shape LGA priorities across local authority aspirations”

The Environment, Economy, Housing, and Transport (EEHT) Board has had a large and varied work programme over the past 12 months, in terms of providing strategic oversight of the LGA's policy, regulatory, and improvement activity in relation to a broad range of issues, from looking at how councils can get funding to provide social housing, advise Government on green transport, and engage with other organisations and bodies to ensure the local government voice is heard on the issues of the day.

As well as all this, as the Independent Group also runs a EEHT think tank and we've had some very interesting and productive sessions on housing and transport, particularly in relation to environmental sustainability and climate change, so on this, thank you to the wider group of councillors who take the time to ensure that our voice is heard.

Improvement and Innovation Board



Councillor Neil Prior

Pembrokeshire County Council
Deputy Chair

The Improvement and Innovation Board's role is to provide strategic oversight of the LGA's policy and improvement activity to assist councils in improving their performance and productivity – in line with the LGA's priorities and the Grant Determination Letter agreed with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). In doing so, it delivers an effective programme of sector-led support, including peer challenges, productivity, leadership development programmes, tools to share performance data, and provides an overarching framework for the sector's work on sector-led improvement.

In my final year as Deputy Chair and lead member for the productivity portfolio, with a slightly re-focused responsibility for digital, data and technology, I've supported the team's work which has built upon its existing offers, and shaped relevant support offers to meet the immediate and emerging needs of the sector.

The LGA's cyber, digital and technology offer aims to improve the secure use of digital technology by councils and communities, and does this by providing training and workshops, bespoke support such as Cyber 360s, and shaping and influencing policy. A few highlights include funding over £1 million worth of cyber qualifications for 221 councils, launching the digitalisation leadership essentials programme (which I was able to part-facilitate), and the launch of the Local Government Digitalisation Almanac, which received widespread coverage.

The Behavioural Insights programme supports councils to deliver projects that encourages behaviour change amongst communities and citizens to address key service challenges and continues to be applied to increasingly complex issues in local government. This year the team has supported 28 councils in three consortium groups across the north east, Kent and Devon, and has convened the Behaviour Change

Leads Group providing a networking opportunity for over 55 councils. I was personally able to chair the LGA Behavioural Insights Conference which was attended by over 400 delegates.

The Procurement team supports effective procurement and commissioning of services by local government. At a time of rising costs and increasing demand on services, the team has continued to build on its excellent reputation and has updated the National Procurement Strategy and toolkit, hosted webinars and roundtables on topics such as social value, the cost of living crisis, and sustainable procurement to a combined audience of over 700 delegates. Sector satisfaction with the programme is evidenced by the 6,000 subscribers to the weekly procurement newsletter.

This brief report does not do justice to the work of the team across other areas such as the continued use and adoption of data through the award-winning data benchmarking platform LG Inform, the Economic Growth programme, and other improvement offers and activities. My role in advocating the Productivity team's work is made easier by the outstanding individuals who bring professionalism, dedication and enthusiasm to their work.

In my final year as a Deputy Chair of the Board, I hope that I've been an active and visible advocate for local government's improvement. I've written or had input into several articles for the LGA's 'First' magazine for councillors – from cyber security to connected communities, helped launch the Local Government Digitalisation Almanac in publications such as UK Authority, and spoke in the Innovation Zone at the first in-person LGA Annual Conference since the COVID-19 pandemic, in Harrogate.

I've continued to chair webinars and conferences, including the Behavioural Insights Conference, the Digital Showcase Conference, and at the time of writing I'm due to chair a Climate Change and Procurement webinar and speak at the LGA Annual Conference as a panellist on the new Procurement Act.

I've attended the LGA Peer Conference, am involved in shaping the Independent Group's peer offer for the future, and I've contributed to the LGA's recent Corporate Peer Challenge on itself. I'm a tutor on both the LGA Leadership Academy and the Welsh LGA Leadership programme for councillors, delivering content that helps other councillors refine their skills to lead their councils and communities more effectively.

As I step down from the board in the next few months, I would like to say that it has been an honour to serve, and I hope that I have made a positive impact on the sector's improvement. My time on the board has been made significantly easier by the excellent support from officers and councillors across the LGA. Thank you for the opportunity.

People and Places Board



Councillor Emily O'Brien

Lewes District Council
Deputy Chair

I've had a busy year as the Independent Group's lead member for the People and Places Board which represents the interest of more rural and coastal areas ('non-metropolitan' areas as the LGA refers to them) and this year has been a busy one.

As well as regular board and lead member meetings, I've been a representative on two ministerial working groups, including one developing the future of green jobs (which so many of our councils are key to the delivery of) and one developing future nature jobs.

I'd like to thank Sue Roberts and Kevin Etheridge who have been our representatives on the board along with the very able substitutes who have supported us.

Also, everyone who has contributed via the People and Places Think Tank, which is the email list through which you get to input into what we say at board meetings. Membership of this has grown over the last year and we have had some great discussions.

Some key areas for the board were:

Levelling up and devolution

This has been a key topic. The LGA's Levelling Up Locally Inquiry report was published in March 2023, and I was involved in two of the roundtable discussion which informed this.

The Independent Group has taken a lead on speaking up against the requirement for elected mayors for the devolution deals on the table, which we are strongly opposed to and have had several occasions where our divergence from the LGA stance has been noted.

“A key priority of the board has been the need for green jobs and skills to deliver net zero ambitions”

Growth funding and local enterprise partnerships (LEPS)

The board, along with the city regions board, has played a role in the LGA lobbying around increased openness and better process on funds such as the Levelling up Fund, Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural Shared Prosperity Fund. There have been several discussions at the board, plus letters to ministers.

The board commissioned Shared Intelligence to capture learning for policymakers in central and local government from eight place-based programmes that have been delivered over the last 20 years. The final report identifies eight key lessons for policymakers to consider. The report has recently been published.

On the demise of LEPS, the People and Places Board and the City Regions Board commissioned Shared Intelligence to provide support for councils and combined authorities undertaking integration and to share good practice and learning, and the LGA is lobbying to help Government to make sure this goes well.

Employment and skills

This has been a key area for the Board and has been given impetus since last summer's publication of the LGA's employment and skills devolution proposals: 'Work Local: Unlocking talent to level up'.

Our board has been involved in LGA work to develop a guide to economic development teams – their role and skills needs. The report shows how economic development services are delivered across England, shares learning across the sector with examples and top tips of what works, and sets out the future skills and capacity challenges they face and where they can go for support. It will be published as an online guide on the LGA website.

A joint piece of work developed by People and Places, City Regions, and Community Wellbeing boards has explored the role of local government in addressing economic inactivity and what factors could be driving this locally, which will be published in summer 2023.

Green jobs and skills

A key priority of the board has been the need for green jobs and skills to deliver net zero ambitions. This includes influencing Government policy to enable local government to bring together skills providers, businesses, and industry. To do so, the People and Places, and City Regions, boards have been supporting the local government representative on the Ministerial Green Jobs Delivery Board.

There has also been a focused piece of work through the 'local capability' sub-group of the Green Jobs Delivery Board which I have been the representative of on behalf of the People and Places Board, and I have also represented both the city regions Board and People and Places Board on the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) nature skills working group.

Digital connectivity

Digital connectivity has continued to be a priority for the board – it is just so important for our rural areas. The board's long-standing call for Government to recognise the importance of local authority digital champions was recognised in Government's recently published UK Wireless Infrastructure Strategy.

With the digital switchover, the LGA published a digital switchover readiness survey to understand councils' position on awareness, planning and implementation to inform the LGA's support offer to councils and the board's lobbying position. The digital switchover hub has been updated in collaboration with key partners and a communications toolkit has been developed for councils to raise awareness of the switchover locally. We are also looking at the implications of 2G and 3G switch-off. The board also commissioned DMS Research and Consulting to produce a report on councils' role in tackling digital exclusion, which has recently been published.

Resources Board



Councillor Jason Zadrozny

Ashfield Council
Deputy Chair

This is the end of my four years as Deputy Chairman of the Resources Board, representing the Independent Group.

The board has met often over the past four years, discussing a large and varied workstream. The nature of changes coming from Government has meant that the board has had to comment on many detailed reports at pace.

Outside of the formal board meeting there has been a huge number of lead member meetings and correspondence.

There have been huge issues coming through from Government over the past four years, not least to do with COVID-19 and pressures placed on councils during this time.

“The board has met often over the past four years, discussing a large and varied workstream”

We have worked on public sector pensions, levelling up, discretionary payments, council tax support, business rate retention, the Council Tax Energy Rebate, the New Homes Bonus, and a wide range of financing issues facing local authorities.

The board formally lobbied in a high-profile manner against the cessation on the £20 uplift in Universal Credit. I co-signed a letter to Government on this issue on behalf of the independent group.

We worked on Clause 71 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which proposed amendments to the Local Government Act (2003) to give the Secretary of State new powers to intervene in the capital financing of individual local authorities.

The board responded to consultations from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), primarily to gather views on proposed temporary changes to the accounting code.

We have also worked on changes to the capital framework Minimum Revenue Provision. Our response made suggestions on how the impact of the changes can be mitigated.

With financial pressures continuing in every regard, inflation, procurement pressures and multi-faceted issues hitting local government and residents, it is anticipated the work of the Resources Board will continue to be difficult and move at pace. The Independent and Green representatives on the board have been robust advocates for fairness and for environmental issues to be considered where possible within resources items.

Safer and Stronger Communities Board



Councillor Clive Woodbridge

Epsom and Ewell Council

Deputy Chair

Over the last year, the Safer and Stronger Communities Board (SSCB) has continued to represent the views of councils across the wide range of issues it is responsible for with central Government and national partner agencies. This included supporting councils on issues relating to community cohesion, extremism, and counter terrorism. With the Home Office's handling of asylum seeker and refugee dispersal causing a range of problems for councils, including the targeting of some councillors on social media by groups looking to exploit concerns about the local placement of asylum-seekers and refugees, the board has lobbied government and assisted councils through our Special Interest Group in Countering Extremism.

SSCB has also fed local authority views into the Independent Review of Prevent, which was finally published earlier this year, the forthcoming review of the Contest Strategy, and the preparatory work around the recently published draft Martyn's Law, which seeks to strengthen security at venues and public spaces in the aftermath of the Manchester Arena attack.

There has also been considerable activity around the community safety agenda, including representing the views of local authorities as the Government developed its Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan. This was published at the end of March and took account of the Board's views in several areas. SSCB has also worked on changes to the National Referral Mechanism that supports victims of modern slavery, updated guidance for councils on tackling modern slavery and developed a maturity matrix to enable councils to benchmark their own work on this important issue. In addition, we have continued to inform the implementation of the new duties around reducing serious violence and emergency accommodation for victims of domestic abuse.

Although we thought the Home Office would be further along in its review of community safety partnerships (CSPs) we will be responding to the recently published consultation, which in our view focuses too heavily on the role of police and crime commissioners in directing the activity of CSPs, whereas there should be a greater focus on strengthening local partnership-working and providing CSPs with the resources that they need.

Councils' regulatory roles remain a key strand of work of the board. Earlier this year saw the implementation of the provisions in the Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act. This requires councils to use the National Register of Revocations, Refusals and Suspensions, which was originally established with funding from the board to provide a central database of taxi and private hire vehicle drivers who had been refused licences or had them revoked. This will hopefully make taxis and private hire vehicles even safer to use. Hopefully, SSCB lobbying around the Gambling Act will also bear fruit in giving councils a greater say in the opening of gambling establishments in their areas. The Gambling Act Review White Paper published very recently suggests that Government is considering some of our key asks seriously, although there are still some issues of concern.

“Over the last year, the Safer and Stronger Communities Board (SSCB) has continued to represent the views of councils across the wide range of issues it is responsible for with central Government and national partner agencies”

Another area of the board's work worth highlighting is ongoing input to the UK Resilience Framework, reflecting concern about the absence of councillors in the Civil Contingencies Act emergency planning and response structures.

The board has also been considering the safety implications of the use of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, which has been used in school roofs as well as other structures. The LGA has been working closely with the Department for Education to identify schools where this form of construction has been used.

An area of work added this year to the work of the SSCB is delivering a programme of support for councils to improve community engagement and partnership-working with the voluntary, faith and community sector. A toolkit of good practice is to be published shortly.

Other items due for discussion at the board in coming weeks include public health funerals, the potential repeal of the Vagrancy Act and drugs activity and links to community safety, underlining the broad remit and scope of the Safer and Stronger Communities Board.

Local Partnerships Board



Julian German

Cornwall Council
Member

Local Partnerships may be one of the best-kept secrets in local government, but you need to know more about what it can do for your council.

The purpose of Local Partnerships is to help public sector organisations face the ever-increasing challenge of meeting rising demand for services, with shrinking budgets.

Local Partnerships specialists brings a formidable combination of public and private sector experience, offering the highest quality and most effective support to the public sector. Local Partnerships is a hands-on organisation which works collaboratively for the benefit of our clients, often sitting alongside project teams rather than providing advice from afar. Local Partnerships provides capacity and capability where it is needed.

“Local Partnerships may be one of the best kept secrets in local government, but you need to know more about what it can do for your Council”

Key areas of expertise include housing, infrastructure, climate response, energy, waste, retrofit, assurance, homelessness, Public Private Partnerships, Private Finance Initiatives and Mutual Investment Model’s commercialisation and reorganisation.

Did you know?

Local Partnerships is jointly owned by the LGA, HM Treasury and Llywodraeth Cymru – the Welsh Government and was set up to give consultancy support to the public sector. Surplus goes back to the Limited Liability Partnership owners, and this is a significant income stream for the LGA.

A year ago, I joined the Board of Local Partnerships for the LGA Independent Group. As a board member I need to act in the best interests of the company. While I am content that the aims of Local Government Association Independent councillors and Local Partnerships align, many councillors will be familiar with this position, being appointed to outside bodies by their councils. At the same time that I joined, we had a new Chairperson appointed – Keith Fraser, and a new Chief Executive – Adele Gritten. So, while business has continued as normal, this year has seen a lot of board discussion on our purpose and strategy. Local Partnerships has a lot to offer councils, and we want to do more. Our motivation is not growth for growth's sake, but an understanding that many councils have limited capacity and that Local Partnerships has much expertise to offer; so, a desire to do more is about supporting councils and our residents to get the best possible outcomes.

Of particular interest to councillors may be the resource hub, including the Homelessness Prevention Tool.

Recent activity has included marking Earth Day on 22 April with the promotion of some of the Local Partnerships free resources:

Greenhouse Gas Accounting Tool

The Greenhouse Gas Accounting Tool has been developed by Local Partnerships, working with the LGA, to provide a straightforward and consistent approach for councils seeking to calculate their own carbon baseline

Waste Emissions Calculator

This calculator has been developed to aid local authorities in understanding carbon emissions from their waste management and treatment operations.

Climate Adaptation Toolkit

The Climate Adaptation Toolkit is a five-step process to help you prepare for the impacts the current and future climate could have on your local authority, residents, and the services you provide

Local Partnerships will be at the LGA Annual Conference, so this will provide an opportunity for some of you to have a conversation with the organisation.

Thank you to the Independent Group for the opportunity to serve on this board.

If you think I can be of assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at cllr.julian.german@cornwall.gov.uk or on 07737 183690.

Congress of the Council of Europe



Linda Gillham

Runnymede Council
Regional Member

This year has seen a return to in-place monitoring of elections, although some have continued online.

There have also been teams travelling to observe the application of the Charter of Local Self-Government. These activities monitor the situation of local and regional democracy in the 46 member states.

The Ukrainian delegation has attended all congress meetings and, in March, brought the wives of Ukrainian soldiers who were prisoners of war in Russia to meet us.

For me, the last plenary session in March 2023 provided a valuable and very interesting opportunity. The UK's Permanent Representative to the Council of Europe, Sandy Moss, had invited the Irish delegation to join the UK representatives at a reception along with the judges from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for both countries.

Tim Eiche, KC, has been the UK judge for six years and he gave us an insight into the rigorous process of selection for prospective judges. Each of the 46 member states appoints one judge to the court.

The Irish judge Siofra O'Leary is currently President of the ECHR and had fascinating stories to tell.

The UK consistently has the lowest number of cases before the court and, not surprisingly, Russia and Ukraine are at the top of the table.

It is hoped to arrange for the UK delegation to visit the court in Strasbourg at the October plenary meeting.

Council of European Municipalities and Regions



Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council

The Council of European Municipalities and Region (CEMR) represents over 100,000 councils across all 40 countries of Europe, including the third not in the EU, established over 70 years ago.

In the same way that councils work together in the LGA, so the national LGAs work together across UK in the UK Forum and across Europe in the CEMR. We share good practice and seek to influence legislation.

Ensuring that we learn from our international partners was one of the recommendations of the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge. Having engaged with many of our European and International Colleagues this year and as the CEMR spokesperson on Climate and Environment, and a member of CEMR's Expert Group on Climate and Energy, I certainly agree.

In July last year, I attended the CEMR Policy Committee in Bologna, discussing how to support refugees from Ukraine. I had previously visited the refugee camps in Greece. I presented a speech sharing our work on our Debate not Hate campaign, which was well received. We have a working group on tackling violence against women, bringing forward recommendations for all our governments. We visited the new European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts and the impact on preparation for extreme weather events and air quality.

In September 2022, I attended the CEMR retreat, where I spoke on waste and climate change and we worked on gender equality, 'future shocks', the cost of living, and refugees.

In October 2022, I joined other LGA leaders to attend a UK / France local government forum event, looking at shared experiences from the local level and working together on facing common challenges. I led the roundtable on how we ensure public services are providing in a way that contributes to green transition, particularly looking at retrofit and net zero.

“The Council of European Municipalities and Regions does a huge amount of work that we can draw upon”

It was my honour and pleasure to represent CEMR as their local government spokesperson on the environment at the COP27 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Egypt in November 2022. Only at COP could we experience such ‘inspiration overload’. 30,000 people attended from all over the world to create a vibrant and determined force for good. I spoke on the stage four times. At the beginning, when government agreements seemed to be a bit slow, I spoke about how much even one councillor can do and how much our councils are doing, leading the way with over 300 councils explicitly committed to net zero and making the matching changes in their business plans, funding and staffing, with or without government support. I gave credit to our councillors and the work of the Local Government Association, passing the emergency climate motion to support the 17 sustainable goals agreed by the United Nations. I drew on our webinars, briefings and the 180 case studies on the LGA’s Climate change hub. I also referenced the work of the CEMR, and the expert groups I experienced to help improve and shape the European Green Deal. I got a flurry of follow-up interest afterwards and was asked to write an article for an international journal for local government about tackling climate change.

At the full ministerial meeting focusing on local government, we launched our document ‘Sustainable urban resilience for the next generation’, or SURGE for short. The world local government event hosted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) was full. I gave the keynote speech on reaching zero waste, focusing on examples of effective multi-level actions needed in legislation, councils, industry and the public working together, often using innovative solutions. These included the straw-fired power station in North Kesteven District Council, which contributed to massively reducing our fossil fuel consumption. I praised councils that own their own solar arrays and other renewable energy sources, helping to insulate them from price hikes. What was waste is now a raw material. Now, we are required to make electricity, released from gas, from the now almost defunct landfill sites - some of which are now also being mined to recover materials.

On a panel at the Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), I spoke on the 'The pact for the future of the planet'. I included how some councils are changing the criteria of our pension investments so the billions of pounds we hold can do some good for the environment in green investments – work initiated by our group members. Finally, on a panel on 'Capacity-building in green skills', I talked about the local government budget announced the previous day leaving us little capacity to do more than the fundamental services and illustrating why sustainability cannot be an add-on but is part of all that we do.

In December 2022, I spoke at a special CEMR debate on social polarisation and abuse of councillors at an event in Paris, where I outlined the good work that has been done by the LGA on civility in public life and as part of the Debate not Hate campaign, listening to colleagues across the whole of Europe who have similar concerns. Furthermore, following a magnificent piece of work, we launched a new equality charter

I hope you can see that the Council of European Municipalities and Regions does a huge amount of work that we can draw upon. It has taken time for me and our UK team to strongly contribute and establish support in Europe, to be asked to speak on behalf of Europe and to bring back ideas and a stronger resolve. I am deeply honoured and humbled to have been able to give our Independent Group and the LGA such significant profile and recognition on the international stage.

The Independent Group Office



Abigail Gallop

Head of the Independent Group
Local Government Association (LGA)
abigail.gallop@local.gov.uk

Highlight of the year – My highlight of the year is having set up the programme, with the support of Councillor Marianne Overton MBE, the Civility in Public Life programme winning the Civility in Politics Bridge Builders of the Year Award 2022

Most excited about next year – I'm most looking forward to working with all our new Green and Independent council leaders.



Rodrigo Sanchez

Political Officer to the Independent Group
Local Government Association (LGA)
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Highlight of the year – My highlight of the year is leading and promoting the 2023 Candidate School and appreciating the support given by long-standing councillors and regional peers as guest speakers for individuals interested in becoming councillors. Also, designing and producing our 'Welcome Pack' for newly elected councillors following the 2023 local elections.

Most excited about next year – I am excited to attend my first LGA Annual Conference as well as help on my first LGA Corporate Peer Challenge.



Picture credits

Councillor Warne Twitter @TWellsAlliance (top right)

Councillor Beavis Twitter @Jobeavis (right)

Councillor Worley Twitter @THamletJosh (left)

Councillor Browne Twitter @Craig_9320 (middle)



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