

The Independent Group

Annual Report 2025/26



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Group Leader's year in review



Photo: Independent Group committee leads.
Photo: LGA Independent Group Office

Councillor Hannah Dalton

Leader of the LGA Independent Group
Vice-Chair of the Local Government Association
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

A year of political change and local leadership

The 2026 local elections represented one of the most consequential periods of political transition in local government in recent years.

In this challenging political environment, we are seeing the growth of a greater range of national political parties securing more of the vote, which has sadly impacted many of our colleagues.

Independents continue to be a credible voice at the ballot box and the independent group representation within the LGA has increased to 10.9 per cent up from 10.6 per cent in 2025 and 10.2 per cent in 2024.

Independent councillors remain uniquely positioned to provide the community leadership our residents are looking for; leadership grounded in local understanding, responsive to community need and focused on practical delivery.

This past year, councils have continued to navigate sustained financial pressure, increasing demand across statutory services, organisational change arising from local government reorganisation, workforce pressures and rising expectations from residents.

Against this backdrop, the Local Government Association Independent Group has remained focused on supporting independent councillors and those from small parties, strengthening local democratic leadership and ensuring that independent voices continue to contribute meaningfully to national and sector-wide conversations about the future of local government.

This report reflects the breadth of work undertaken by the Group over the past year, the strategic priorities that have guided our programme, and the collective effort of councillors, peers, officers and partners who continue to strengthen the Independent Group's position within the wider local government sector.

Establishing strategic direction

Executive Away Day – Reading, September 2025

A significant milestone in the Group's collective journey this year was the Executive Away Day held in Reading in September 2025. This marked the first occasion that the Group's full leadership team convened in person to undertake a structured strategic review of the Group's priorities, influence and long-term direction.

Over the two days the Executive worked together to establish strategic clarity, aligning our collective ambition and defining a renewed direction for the Group during a period of significant political and organisational change within local government. Importantly, the Away Day provided an opportunity not only to reflect on the challenges facing councils and councillors, but also to consider the evolving role of independent leadership within the wider local government sector.



Photo: Independent Executive Group Away Day.

Photo: LGA Independent Group Office.

The result was a clear strategic framework that has subsequently informed the Group’s programme of work throughout the year; a first for the Group. The Executive reaffirmed the Group’s role within the LGA as a champion of locally grounded, evidence-led and community-focused leadership. This positioning remains particularly important at a time when councils are increasingly required to respond to complex social, economic and governance challenges that demand practical rather than ideological solutions.

Several strategic priorities emerged and have subsequently informed the Group’s work throughout the year. These included strengthening democratic participation and widening independent representation, prioritising the interests of children and young people within policy development, advancing inclusive and community-focused approaches to migration and social cohesion, ensuring the experience of those who are affected by decisions and use services is heard in LGA policy development and positioning, and developing practical responses to local economic resilience during a period of constrained public finances.

Strengthening national engagement

Green Party Conference – Bournemouth

Throughout the year, the Group maintained an active presence at key sector and political events. Attendance at the Green Party Conference in Bournemouth provided an opportunity to engage directly with members and senior political leadership on emerging LGA policy priorities and the future direction of local government.



Photo: Green Party Conference with Independent Group Leader Hannah Dalton, Deputy Leader Andrew Cooper, Localis Senior Researcher Callin McLinden and We’re Right Here Community Leader Phil Frodsham.
Photo: LGA Independent Group Office.

As part of the conference programme, I chaired a fringe session on ‘Neighbourhood governance: how to empower local communities’. The session generated significant engagement and reflected growing national interest in strengthening local participation, rebuilding democratic trust and creating governance structures that are more responsive to community need.

The debate highlighted the increasing importance of neighbourhood-level decision making and reinforced the role independent councillors can play in developing more participatory and locally accountable forms of governance. These themes continue to inform the Group’s broader thinking on democratic renewal and community empowerment.

Resilience in local government

Independent Group Annual Conference – Leeds 2026

The Independent Group Annual Conference, held in Leeds over the last weekend of January, and sponsored by Local Partnerships, represented the centrepiece of the Group’s annual programme.

Under the theme ‘Resilience for Councillors, Community and Place’, the conference responded directly to the realities facing councils and elected members across England and Wales.

The theme reflected the growing pressures experienced by councillors operating within financially constrained and rapidly changing local government environments. Across the sector, elected members continue to navigate rising demand for services, organisational restructuring, increasing public expectation and the cumulative impact of sustained operational pressure on councils and communities alike.

The two-day conference programme brought together our members from district, county, unitary and combined authorities alongside researchers, policy experts and practitioners with direct experience across the sector. Sessions explored a range of interconnected themes including personal resilience, digital security, climate adaptation, community wellbeing, social cohesion and the future resilience of local government institutions.

Contributions from nationally recognised speakers ensured that discussions remained practical, evidence-based and grounded in delivery experience. The conference also created important space for peer learning, reflection and professional support at a time when many councillors continue to experience increasing workloads and heightened public scrutiny. Our speakers included:

- Matt Masters, from The Truth about Local Government who ran an inspiring workshop on personal resilience as a councillor.
- Rob Hopkins, co-founder of Transition Network and published author, led a forward-looking plenary on the resilience of future generations.

- Callin McLinden from Localis and Dave Sifleet (LGA), focused our attention on our digital resilience.
- Dr Pedi Obani from the University of Bradford led a plenary session focusing on climate resilience.
- Nadeem Siddique from Leeds City Council led a powerful plenary on social cohesion and resilience.
- Edward Davie, from Better Mental Health Training and a visiting lecturer to Kings College London, shared his thoughts on community wellbeing and resilience.
- Eve Roodhouse (LGA) and Jo Wall (Local Partnerships), brought national perspective and practical insight.

Our annual Awards Dinner was the opportunity to recognise exceptional contributions and to celebrate the leadership, commitment and public service demonstrated by councillors throughout the year.

The overwhelmingly positive feedback from delegates reinforced the value of the conference, both professionally and personally. For many attendees, it provided an opportunity to gain knowledge and meet new colleagues, as well as to reconnect with a wider community of councillors facing similar challenges across the country.

Our 2027 Independent Group Annual Conference will be held at the end of January. The conference theme will be 'Futures', and I hope to see you there.

Developing future leadership

Next Generation programme

The development of future leadership continues to remain a strategic priority for the Group and our Next Generation programme continues to contribute to strengthening the pipeline of future independent leaders across local government.

Through the programme we demonstrate our commitment to ensuring that independent councillors are equipped to respond to current challenges and are able to contribute to shaping the future direction of local government.

Under the guidance of our National Member Peer, Councillor Adam Paynter, participants complete an exciting programme focused on developing their leadership, governance, strategic thinking and public service knowledge and skills.



Photo: Next Generation 2025/26 cohort.
Photo: LGA Independent Group Office.

The graduation of the Class of 2025/26 represents our commitment to investing in our leadership capability so that their resilience and sector knowledge remains essential if local government is to continue to adapt in what is an increasingly complex operating environment.

This year we will welcome a new cohort into the Next Generation programme, ensuring that we continue to support the next generation of independent community leaders.

Responding to structural change

Local Councils Network Conference – Old Windsor

The Group attended the Local Councils Network Conference in Old Windsor in March 2026, formerly the District Councils Network, which has evolved to reflect the changing structure of local government and the wider implications of local government reorganisation.

The conference focused on key themes affecting councils nationally, including local government reorganisation, public sector reform, leadership through change and community empowerment. These issues continue to shape the operational and political landscape facing councils across England and Wales.

Together with DCN Vice-Chair Councillor Paul Harvey, I co-hosted the Group political session, giving an independent perspective on the strategic and governance implications of reorganisation. Our conversation focused on how councils can maintain democratic accountability, organisational stability and community trust during periods of structural transition and political uncertainty.



Photo: LCN member delegates. Photo: LGA Independent Group Office.

Supporting councils through political transition

2026 local elections and change of control programme

Ahead of the 2026 local elections, the Group, with the LGA's Regional Teams, delivered a comprehensive Change of Control support programme designed to assist councils anticipating political transition and changes in governance arrangements.

The programme recognised the increasingly complex nature of political transition within local government, particularly in councils operating under multi-party or minority-control arrangements. Effective governance during periods of change requires not only political leadership, but also strong institutional coordination, officer engagement and organisational preparedness.

The support package included leadership transition guidance, political awareness work with senior officers, scenario planning and targeted masterclasses for chief executives and statutory officers. Political groups and regional teams worked directly with authorities to ensure incoming administrations were able to establish effective governance arrangements and maintain organisational stability from the outset.

This work reflected the Group's wider commitment to supporting resilient local governance and ensuring councils are equipped to navigate political transition effectively and responsibly.

Looking ahead

The future of independent leadership

The year ahead will undoubtedly continue to present significant challenges for local government. Financial sustainability, organisational reform, devolution, democratic engagement and workforce resilience will remain central issues across the sector.

However, the past year has also demonstrated the growing strength, maturity and relevance of independent leadership within local government. Independent councillors continue to play an increasingly important role in shaping administrations, supporting communities and contributing to constructive, evidence-led governance across England and Wales.

The Independent Group enters the next year with renewed strategic clarity and a strengthened commitment to supporting councillors, championing local democracy and ensuring independent voices remain central to the future of local government.

I would like to give my sincere thanks to every member of the Executive, our Member Peers, Policy Committees, officers, partners and councillors whose professionalism, dedication and commitment continue to strengthen the LGA Independent Group.

Most importantly, I want to recognise the contribution of independent councillors serving communities across England and Wales during an exceptionally challenging period for public service. Your resilience, integrity and commitment to local leadership remain the foundation of this Group's continued growth and influence.

The challenges ahead are significant, but so too are the opportunities. The Independent Group will continue to advocate for strong local leadership, resilient communities and a modern local government sector that remains accountable, inclusive and rooted in the communities it serves.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the Independent Group Office – Abigail, Lioko and Noleen – for the incredible support and insight they provide to me and all of us. We can only do what we do and have the voice we have across the LGA and local government because of their unwavering commitment to us and the sector.

Sadly, this is my first and last Foreword to the Annual Report and I would like to thank you for the support given to me in my time as Group Leader. When I exit local politics at the end of March next year, I will continue to cheer you all on and the incredible work you do each and every day that makes such a difference to communities across England and Wales.



Councillor Hannah Dalton

Leader of the LGA Independent Group
Vice-Chair of the Local Government Association
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hannah".

Deputy Group Leader's Year in Review



Councillor Andrew Cooper

Kirklees
Deputy Leader

This certainly has been a year of challenges and changes. One of my highlights though of the year was representing the Group at the UK Local Government Associations Forum in Edinburgh, where we reviewed and renewed our commitment to Civility in Public Life. It was also having the opportunity to speak as part of the LGA-supported sessions at the Green Party Conference.

One of the challenges has been influencing central government, with their majority in the House of Commons, particularly on the Devolution and Community Wellbeing Act. I know colleagues and parts of the LGA lobbied strongly for councils to retain the flexibility to determine their own governance, whether that be Cabinet or committee system. However, in spite of those proposals being voted down in the House of Lords, the Government has ploughed on. Perhaps they will find this increasingly challenging as their own party members try to navigate multi-party councils, as we have seen in the last set of elections.

Perhaps the biggest change now facing us is the decision for Green Party Councillors to form their own LGA Grouping. As a Green Party Councillor, I would like to thank the Independent Group for providing us with LGA support, recognition and the ability to influence, which was only possible by being part of the Independent Group. I hope we will continue to work collaboratively as we act as the voice of local government through the LGA.

LGA Independent Group budget report



Councillor Johnny Denis

Lewes District Council
Treasurer / AGM Chair

The Independent Group was allocated £36,801 for the year 2025/26. The LGA Political Group Office budget allocation process is a proportion of the overall LGA Political Group budget based on the previous year's political proportionality. The Group spent £36,207.48 for the year 2025/26, excluding the additional charge made to the Group for the 2025 LGA Annual Conference Independent Group Dinner (£2,917.97) and the unpaid attendee invoices to the 2023 Wyboston Lakes Independent Group Annual Conference (£1,354.25) which was transferred to this year's budget to harmonise the LGA's accounting.

The Group secured **£11,103** in income from the Group Annual Conference, including delegates, sponsorship and the exhibition zone.

An update from our Lead Member Peers



Councillor Adam Paynter

Independent Group National Lead Peer



Councillor Sue Shanks

National Lead Peer for Green Members

We have five regional lead peers:

Councillor Jim McKenna

Regional Lead 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 Georgina Hill

Regional Lead Peer: North-East and Yorkshire and Humberside

Councillor Malcolm Grimston

Regional Lead Peer: South-East and London

In the past year we have seen huge changes in local government both at the elections and local government reorganisation. At a regional level, our work has included providing support for councillors helping to resolve disagreements; advice to group members where there has been a change of control including negotiating within the no overall control (NOC) councils after the May 2026 elections; leadership support and mentoring; advice on policy issues; and advice on protocols. We have seen an increase in NOC councils and Independent Group-led councils over the last few years due to the huge amount of work being put in by our members and the poor performance of the ruling party at a national level.

There have been hybrid and 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 Liverpool and Peer Conference in Manchester.

In addition to our regional peers, we have a strong pool of 55 member peers who have supported councillors and councils in various ways. We continue training for all of our peers and interviews with new peers to ensure the standard of peer work is kept high within our group. This is especially important with the increasing pressure on councils and the accountability needed to central government, whose grant pays for this work.

Here is a list of some of our peer-supported work during the year:

- **Mentoring** – 13, with nine more awaiting confirmation of peer selection
- **Facilitation** – 15, including planning, local government reorganisation, strategic authorities, leadership and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
- **Corporate Peer Challenge** – five, with one awaiting confirmation
- **Corporate Parenting Diagnostic** – one with one pending
- **Bespoke planning session** – one
- **Development session** – one: effective scrutiny of children's services
- **Corporate Parenting Diagnosis** – one and one waiting peer selection

Next Generation programme

I helped facilitate the Independent Group's twelfth 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. 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 Independent Group Board members

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

Councillor Anne Dale

Northumberland County Council
anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk

Finance and Performance Committee

Councillor Caroline Jackson

Lancaster City Council
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HR and Remuneration Committee

Councillor Hannah Dalton

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
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Children and Young People and Families Committee

Councillor Natalie McVey

Deputy Chair
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nmcvey2@worcestershire.gov.uk

Councillor Debbie Andre

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Councillor Hayley Whitaker

Central Bedfordshire Council
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Culture, Tourism and Sport Committee

Councillor Julie Jones-Evans

Chair

Isle of Wight Council

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Councillor Johnny Denis

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Councillor Huw Thomas Murphy

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Fire and Rescue Authority Committee

Councillor Dr Wendy Maples

Lead Member

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Councillor Stuart Wilson

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Councillor Nikki Hennissey

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Health and Wellbeing Policy Committee

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Improvement Committee

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Lead Member

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Councillor Caroline Topping

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Councillor Guy Lambert

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Inclusive Growth Committee

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Lead Member

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Councillor Anna Charles-Jones

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Councillor Jonathan Essex

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Local Government Resources Committee

Councillor Doug McMurdo

Lead Member

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Councillor Theo Dennison

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Councillor Steven Stuart

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Neighbourhoods Committee

Councillor Emily O'Brien

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Councillor Diana Moore

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Councillor Andrew Walters

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Public Service Reform and Innovation Committee

Councillor Julia Hilton

Lead Member

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Councillor Caritas Charles

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Councillor Carlyne Culver

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Safer and Stronger Communities Committee

Councillor Karen Lucioni

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Councillor Judith Wallace

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Councillor Abu Chowdhury

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Photo: LGA President, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee



Councillor Anne Dale

Northumberland County Council

anne.dale@northumberland.gov.uk

As the Independent Group representative on Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) I have attended over the year all the regular Board meetings, as well as the extra meetings and training and development events.

I attended the induction event for committee members in September last year. This included training about the roles of the internal audit and external auditors and the risk and control environment. Other responsibilities include complaints relating to members, deep dives and the procurement of internal and external auditors.

ARAC is responsible for monitoring the integrity of the finances of the LGA and overseeing the risk management systems and reports annually to the Board.

The committee is independent and objective; it receives reports from both internal and external auditors to review and comment on. The committee responds to the external auditor's annual fraud questionnaire. It also leads on the assessment of the Annual Governance Statement for the Board.

Due to the changes in the structure of the LGA at the present time, ARAC is working with the Finance and Performance Committee to advise on new policies for the Board. The committee is aware of the changes and seeks assurance that all risks are managed appropriately.

I would like to thank the officers responsible to ARAC for their work and support over the last year.

Finance and Performance Committee



Councillor Caroline Jackson

Lancaster City Council

cjackson@lancaster.gov.uk

The Finance and Performance Committee has met four times since June 2025 under the capable leadership of Councillor Bridget Smith, Liberal Democrat, with officer support from Jonathan Gratte. Each meeting is required to cover business regarding company financial affairs and the performance of its assets, 18 Smith Square and Layden House, whose rents provide income to the organisation. At each meeting, the committee is required to produce a 'three As' report for the Board of Directors indicating how it would Alert, Advise and Assure the company regarding its affairs. The committee, which acts as an advisory body to the Directors of the LGA company, has not been in existence previously and has had some major considerations this year:

- projected budget concerns in short and longer term
- the development of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy
- the rollout of the Transformation Fund which includes the major IT project to update security and digital services
- the ongoing uncertainty regarding 2026/27 budget introduced by the as yet incomplete Future Operating Model
- the operation of cash flow affected by repairs required to the LGA building and possible costs for staff restructure
- the way that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) both presents extra resource requirement on the LGA and is likely to reduce income
- ongoing legal concerns regarding Layden House
- the need to maximise income, reorganise the accommodation in Smith Square and acquire new tenants.

I should like to acknowledge the support I have received from LGA officers in serving on this committee.

Children and Young People and Families Committee



Councillor Natalie McVey

Deputy Chair

Worcestershire County Council

nmcvey2@worcestershire.gov.uk

Independent and Green councillors made a strong and consistent contribution to the work of the LGA Children, Young People and Families Committee throughout 2025/26, ensuring that the voices of children, young people and families remained central to committee discussions and policy development.

Across all meetings, Independent Group members were highly engaged, well prepared and influential in shaping debate. Councillors consistently brought forward practical, experience-led contributions, often focusing on the real-life impact of national policy decisions on vulnerable children, care-experienced young people and families within local communities.

One of the Group's most significant achievements was securing agreement that the voice of children and young people should become a 'golden thread' running throughout the committee work programme. Independent and Green members also successfully advocated for mental health considerations to be embedded across discussions and decision-making processes.

The Group played a particularly strong role in discussions relating to SEND, early years intervention, children's social care, care leavers and education reform. members repeatedly challenged policy proposals constructively and ensured that issues of equity, inclusion and long-term outcomes were fully considered.

Notable contributions from Independent and Green councillors included:

- advocating for stronger support for care-experienced young people, including housing priority, free prescriptions and improved transition support into adulthood
- raising concerns about the growing financial and social pressures surrounding SEND provision and home to school transport
- championing the need for better national benchmarking, clearer performance measures and stronger accountability
- highlighting the importance of early intervention, prevention and accessible family support services
- challenging postcode lotteries in support available to care leavers and vulnerable young people
- ensuring safeguarding and domestic abuse concerns were considered within emerging policy proposals
- questioning the impact of short-term funding settlements, local government reorganisation and wider structural changes on already pressured children's services.

Independent Group members were also proactive in improving committee governance and effectiveness. Councillors successfully pushed for better meeting practices, including earlier circulation of papers, greater transparency and more time for meaningful political debate rather than lengthy officer presentations. Their contributions helped strengthen scrutiny and ensured that meetings remained focused on outcomes rather than process.

Throughout the year, Independent and Green councillors were recognised as constructive, knowledgeable and solutions-focused contributors. Their interventions consistently reflected the values of strong local leadership, partnership working and advocacy for vulnerable children and families. The Group established itself as a respected and influential voice within the committee, ensuring that local government experience and community perspectives remained at the heart of national discussions on children's services and family support.

Thank you to my colleagues Debbie Andre and Hayley Whitaker for their dedicated attendance and constructive participation in all meetings, and to substitutes Catherine Powell, Laura Manston and Joe Dunne for attending pre-meetings, contributing to discussions and being prepared to step in if needed.

Thanks also to LGA Independent Group officers Noleen Rosen and Abigail Gallop for their time and support.

Culture, Tourism and Sport Committee



Councillor Julie Jones-Evans

Isle of Wight Council
LGA Libraries Champion
julie.jones-evans@iow.gov.uk

The year began with a sold-out in-person Culture, Tourism and Sport Conference in Bradford in September, aligned with the city's year as UK City of Culture. It was fantastic to see councillors, officers and sector leaders from across the country coming together at a time of significant change for local government and the wider culture, tourism and sport sectors.

Bradford provided a powerful example of culture-led regeneration in practice, with delegates able to experience first-hand the impact investment in culture, heritage and the visitor economy can have on confidence, identity and growth. The conference explored themes including active wellbeing, inequalities in participation, devolution, tourism and the growing role of the creative industries within local economies. My thanks go to the Bradford team, LGA officers and conference sponsor UK Music for helping deliver such a successful event. Following its success, the committee agreed future conferences should continue to align with UK City of Culture celebrations where possible.

This year the committee welcomed contributions from organisations including Sport England, Visit England and leading figures from the creative industries including Sir Peter Bazalgette. Discussions consistently reinforced the importance of culture, tourism and sport not as optional extras, but as central to regeneration, active wellbeing, local economies and opportunities for young people.

February saw the launch of our key research into the role of sport, arts, and culture in supporting community cohesion, drawing together findings and insight from areas following the violent outbreaks in the Summer of 2024.

Alongside this, the committee undertook important policy work on issues including the proposed tourism levy and short-term let registration schemes. These are complex issues, particularly for visitor economy and coastal communities, balancing the benefits tourism brings with pressures on housing, infrastructure and local services. It was important that the committee helped ensure local government perspectives were represented in these national discussions.

In May, I represented the LGA at a Downing Street roundtable on grassroots sports investment, where the West Midlands Combined Authority is leading early work in this area. I highlighted the importance of a place-based approach to investment, recognising that councils understand the specific needs of their communities and the importance of investing in ageing local sports and leisure assets that support health, wellbeing and community cohesion. This built on the work the committee has been doing to identify effective practice in supporting active communities, including our new publications on supporting care-experienced young people and low-income families to be active.

Alongside committee work, I welcomed opportunities during the year to engage directly with Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) ministers, including Secretary of State Lisa Nandy, ensuring local government voices were represented during a period of significant change and challenge for councils and the wider sector.

I also gave evidence to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee in November on planning and historic buildings in relation to housing delivery. This was an important opportunity to make the case that heritage and historic buildings should be seen not as barriers to growth, but as assets that can support regeneration, placemaking and sustainable communities.

We will conclude the year with our final committee meeting as an away day on the Isle of Wight, providing an opportunity to explore directly the opportunities and challenges facing coastal and visitor economy communities.

Finally, I would like to thank committee members, officers and partners for their support and contributions throughout the year. Despite significant pressures across local government, I continue to be encouraged by the passion, creativity and determination shown across the culture, tourism and sport sectors.



Photo: Councillor Julie Jones-Evans, Chair of Culture, Tourism and Sports (CTS) Committee and the Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

Fire and Rescue Authority Committee



Councillor Wendy Maples

Deputy Chair

East Sussex County Council / Lewes District Council

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I had the honour of chairing and now deputy chairing the Fire and Rescue Authority Committee. Formerly the Fire Services Management Committee, the newly renamed 'FRAC' is made up of 18 cross-party members and five substitutes from local authorities, standalone fire authorities and police, fire and crime commissioners.

FRAC has been proactive in pressing for government recognition of the changing role of fire and rescue professionals as a core part of our 2025/26 work programme, covering: Emerging national risks; fire authority governance; fire finance; fire reform; fire safety and public protection; inspection regime; people, inclusion and culture; professionalism and the college of fire; and sector improvement.

A significant focus has been on improved funding, including for capital expenditure to enable modernisation of the service. We have also ensured that the service is recognised as being in the frontline of climate change, with more frequent floodwater rescues; hotter burns during warm and windy weather; increasing numbers of wildfires; and high wind risks – particularly where aerial appliances might be required. Water and air contamination and the need for adequate decontamination provision are also recognised as having significant impacts on the service, along with increasing numbers of lithium-ion battery fires.

It has been our intention to ensure that these extant and emerging realities are best managed with oversight from an informed authority. The LGA did not offer a Fire Leadership training weekend in 2026 but did pilot online members' development workshops. With more staff resource, we believe this could enable members to better and more quickly grasp the scope of the work involved in being a proactive and useful member of both FRAC and their local fire authority.

Our work was to some extent disrupted by needing to shift focus with the advent of local government reorganisation, and to re-establish lines of communication with a change of ministerial responsibility.

FRAC's independent members have also had significant proactive involvement in the national Joint Negotiating Committee (for which there is a short, separate report) and in two ministerial advisory working groups: 'Culture', and 'College of Fire and Rescue'.

The scoping work on culture has honestly recognised problems – including issues of governance – but has also recognised extant good practice across various relevant bodies that can ensure improvement. The College advisory working group has gone further still in identifying positive potential for national and international knowledge exchange, particularly supporting leadership at all levels, and in areas of emerging risk and corresponding expertise.

The highlight of the year was the LGA Fire Conference. Building on the change of emphasis last year, the conference included more workshops and brought in national and international experts to challenge our thinking on areas as diverse as suicide prevention, integrated community resilience, new technologies, and, of course, LGR.

Our three-strong LGA Independent Group team continues to be noticeably well-informed and vocal in our contributions to this important committee that is grounded in the oversight of a highly visible and valued frontline service that – at its best – embodies the public service ethos that we as councillors and members of our local authorities seek to enhance.

Fire Services National Joint Council local authority Fire and Rescue Service



Councillor Nikki Hennessy

Lead Member

West Lancashire Borough Council

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I have the honour of representing the Group on the Fire Service National Joint Council Local Authority Fire and Rescue Service (NJC LAFRS). This cross-party committee works alongside LGA officers, union representatives and government officials. The discussion is confidential until pay deals are agreed.

There are five groups working on the NJC with 28 members in all. The group comes from Employers' Side (LGA members 9), the Convention of Scottish local authorities (3), Welsh LGA (1), the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Services Board (1), Employees' Side: The Fire Brigades Union (14).

The Middle Managers Negotiating Body (MMNB) has 28 members: Employers' Side: LGA (9) members, the Convention of Scottish local authorities (3), Welsh LGA (1), the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Services Board (1), Employees' Side: The Fire Brigades Union (13), the Fire Officers Association (1).

Agreements reached in the NJC and MMNB are contained in the Scheme of Conditions of Service known as the Grey Book.

Health and Wellbeing Policy Committee



Councillor Sarah Rouse

Deputy Chair
Malvern Hills District Council
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Over the past year, the Health and Wellbeing Committee and wider Health and Wellbeing Board have considered some of the most significant challenges currently facing local government, the NHS, and social care. Nationally, councils continue to operate against a backdrop of rising demand for services, workforce shortages, growing mental health pressures, and uncertainty created by ongoing NHS reform, Integrated Care Board (ICB) changes, and the Casey Review into adult social care. Throughout these discussions, Independent Group members played an active and constructive role in ensuring that the focus remained on residents, prevention, and long-term community wellbeing.

A recurring theme across the year has been the relationship between health, housing, deprivation, and community resilience. During discussions on the NHS Ten-Year Plan, Neighbourhood Health models, and wider public health reform, I consistently raised concerns that national policy remains too focused on structures rather than people. Poor housing, homelessness, isolation, and inequality continue to have a direct impact on both physical and mental health outcomes, particularly in rural communities where access to services can already be challenging. The committee repeatedly stressed that without suitable housing and stronger local government involvement, many wider health reforms will struggle to succeed.

Mental health became one of the most prominent issues throughout the year. The committee strongly supported the Mentally Healthier councils Framework and agreed that councils must take a leadership role in improving mental health outcomes within their communities. Discussions highlighted the long-term nature of Mental Health Act reforms, the need for sustainable support services, and the growing pressures on both statutory and voluntary sector provision. Particular emphasis was placed on the links between deprivation, addiction, smoking, obesity, and mental wellbeing, alongside recognition of the increasing need for support around domestic abuse, neurodiversity, and wider community-based interventions.

Adult social care reform and workforce pressures were also central to the committee's work. Nationally, recruitment and retention within the care sector remain extremely difficult, compounded by immigration policy changes and longstanding funding uncertainty. The committee supported the principle of a National Care Wage and raised concerns about the lack of sustainable funding mechanisms to support reform. I also repeatedly emphasised the importance of embedding lived experience within the Casey Review and ensuring that reforms are informed not only by data, but by the voices of people receiving and delivering care.

The committee also considered several important public health priorities, including childhood immunisation and early intervention work linked to the Best Start in Life agenda and National Youth Strategy. We discussed the importance of working more closely with schools, early years settings, and trusted community spaces to improve public health engagement, particularly in areas experiencing higher deprivation and lower uptake of services.

During the year, I attended national meetings and away-day sessions involving senior NHS and public health leaders, including discussions with Professor Chris Whitty and Sally Warren, Interim Director General for Adult Social Care. These discussions reinforced the importance of prevention, integrated working, and stronger collaboration between councils, health services, and communities.

Across all meetings, Independent Group members remained highly engaged, collaborative, and solutions focused. While concerns were raised about agenda management and the limited ability of members to influence work programming, the committee continued to provide robust scrutiny and strong advocacy for residents. Above all, the work this year reinforced that health and wellbeing policy must remain focused on people's lives, dignity, and long-term quality of life, rather than solely on organisational reform.

Improvement Committee



Councillor Julian German

Lead Member

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Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) – Company Board Director – and the LGA Improvement Committee – Deputy Chair and Independent Group Lead Member.

The IDeA is probably the most important element of the LGA that you have not heard of. The IDeA is a company wholly owned by the LGA which secures grant, mostly from government departments, to carry out development work with councils. The company is necessary so that the Government can see the money it grants is being spent on improvement work and not on the LGA's lobbying activity.

Unfortunately, the LGA has previously not, in my view, respected the necessary integrity of the company and the Board was acting as a rubber stamp body rather than acting in the best interests of the company. Previously Group Leaders, who are all LGA Board members, were appointed as IDeA Directors. This municipal year, appointments to the IDeA Board were made separating these people, which, in my view, has led to the required independence of a company board.

All political IDeA Board Directors (there are two Independent Non-Executive Directors) were new and it has been a steep learning curve for us. Unfortunately, our Chair, Councillor Jane Scullion, had to leave the role due to ill health, so this has created further disruption.

The LGA restructure has caused great concern to Directors as staff wholly and partly employed by the IDeA have been included in this. We have continued to question delegations and receive assurance that decisions taken about IDeA staff are taken in the best interests of the company and will not compromise our ability to deliver our contracts.

To give an idea of scale, the IDeA has £19.2m confirmed for the core Sector Support Programme, with additional funding agreed for major service and specialist programmes.

New support agreed this year: the IDeA has secured funding for four new improvement programmes, amounting to c.£4 million in total, in addition to confirmation of continued funding of many other programmes. The programmes are: £3.1 million to deliver public health peer reviews and improvement support over three years, with a focus on councils' use of the public health grant; £269,000 to deliver 13 Strategic Highways peer challenges, supporting local highway authorities that have been rated red by the Department for Transport, to aid their improvement, strengthen leadership and delivery and support good practice; £540,000 to strengthen councils' capability and capacity to address community cohesion challenges; and a further £100,000 to develop a community cohesion toolkit and a series of workshops showcasing effective international approaches to building cohesive communities.

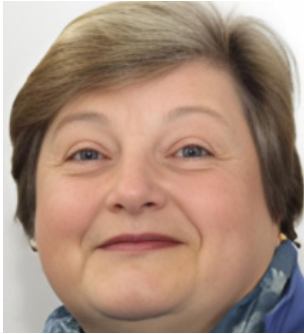
There is a crossover with the LGA Improvement Committee which has a broader representation of councillors. My thanks to Independent Group colleagues on this committee for their dedication and insight.

The Lead Members of the Improvement Committee, along with National Lead Peers for each group, have more in-depth confidential discussions regarding councils with improvement needs.

Hopefully you have seen offers of support in the LGA magazine first and in the LGA Independent Group emails. The whole breadth of support offer can be found at www.local.gov.uk/our-support from workbooks you can do at your own pace at home through to a series of time away (often at Warwick University conference centre) – I can thoroughly recommend these, whether a brand-new councillor or an old hand, you (and your residents) will benefit from the insight and learning you will get from them.

The Improvement Committee leads on the Innovation Zone at the LGA conference, deciding on the content and speakers. I will be chairing a session on community energy, so anyone wishing to catch up with me who is attending the conference will have a great in-person opportunity. Otherwise, I can always be reached via cllr.julian.german@cornwall.gov.uk.

Inclusive Growth Committee



Councillor Mandy Ewings

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For a first year of this committee, it has been intensive, with many government papers to read, some of them several times, in an area of local government which means so much to many of us. I would like to thank Councillor Anna Charles-Jones and Councillor Jonathan Essex for giving up their valuable time, ideas and views, which the committee took forward. We held our own as Independents and one Green member.

This brief insight shows how councils can help deliver the Government's inclusive growth agenda through skills, business support, planning reform, EV infrastructure and housing. The main message is that local government is central to implementation, but needs a clear role, workable powers and sustainable funding if national reforms are to succeed.

- **Post-16 skills and NEETs:** The Government's reforms would strengthen support for young people at risk of being, or who are, not in education, employment or training, with better tracking, stronger post-16 transitions, automatic enrolment proposals and a larger role for strategic authorities. The paper argues that councils must remain central because of their statutory duties and should help shape the forthcoming 16-24 NEETs strategy.
- **Devolution and adult skills:** Strategic authorities are expected to take a stronger role in adult skills, local skills improvement and FE engagement. The paper stresses that councils inside devolved areas should work with mayors, but that government must also support councils outside devolution so residents and employers do not miss out.

- Business growth / Force for Growth: councils are seen as local growth enablers and providers of business support, especially for SMEs. Drawing on the LGA's Force for Growth work, the paper argues that councils act as place leaders, service providers, orchestrators and anchor institutions for local growth. A major concern is that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund ends in March 2026 and the proposed replacement funds are more capital-focused, leaving a gap in the revenue funding needed for practical local business support.
- Planning reform: The paper supports a faster planning system but says reforms must not reduce the value of statutory consultees or transfer undue risk to local planning authorities. It opposes removing Sport England and Theatres Trust as consultees, calls for clearer performance standards, and highlights the need for expertise, capacity and transparent investment.
- EV charging: Government is consulting on planning changes to make EV charge point installation easier, including equipment and storage units in non-domestic car parks and cross-pavement charging arrangements for homes.
- Housing and homelessness: this highlights major planning changes, implementation of the Planning and Infrastructure Act, the National Plan to End Homelessness, and concerns about rent convergence, borrowing rates and housing standards. Across these issues, the consistent view is that councils will be expected to deliver ambitious change and therefore need flexibility, clarity and timely government decisions.

Local Government Resources Committee



Councillor Doug McMurdo

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Over the past year, the Local Government Resources Committee has continued to examine many of the financial, workforce and governance issues affecting councils across England and Wales. Against a backdrop of ongoing financial pressures, service demand and sector reform, the committee has provided an important forum for members to consider emerging policy developments and help shape the Independent Group's position on key issues.

A significant focus of the committee's work has been local government finance. members considered the implications of the Autumn Budget, business rates reform and the emerging timetable for Fair Funding Review 2.0. While welcoming increased funding and the move towards multi-year settlements, members consistently highlighted concerns about the overall adequacy of funding for local government and the potential impact of redistribution changes on individual authorities. The need for robust transitional arrangements remained a key priority throughout discussions.

Workforce issues also featured prominently. The committee reviewed national pay negotiations, workforce resilience and the implications of the Employment Rights Bill. members discussed the financial challenges associated with fair pay agreements, particularly within adult social care, and the wider impact of workforce shortages and rising employment costs on councils.

The sustainability of adult social care and SEND funding remained a recurring concern. Members emphasised the need for meaningful reform backed by sufficient government funding, highlighting the growing financial risks facing authorities and the pressure these services continue to place on council budgets.

The committee also reviewed developments relating to pensions policy, including the Pension Schemes Bill, LGPS reforms and investment requirements. Discussions focused on balancing increasing expectations around investment and reform while maintaining fiduciary responsibility, accountability and appropriate local oversight.

Throughout the year, the committee contributed to consultations on financial governance, council tax policy and CIPFA codes, ensuring the Independent Group's views were represented. Members have continued to provide informed and constructive challenge, helping to strengthen the Group's contribution to national discussions on local government resources and sustainability.

Neighbourhoods Committee



Councillor Emily O'Brien

Vice-Chair
Lewes District Council

Over the past year your Independent and Green representatives on the Neighbourhoods Committee have been actively engaged in shaping LGA positions in key areas:

Recycling reform and plastics

A contentious recent issue was the rollout of flexible plastic collections under 'simpler recycling.' While some groups argued to oppose or delay, the Independent Group position was clear: no overall delay, but allow local flexibility where councils face contractual constraints, alongside proper funding. IG members also stressed the need for wider system change, including reducing plastics at source and ensuring viable markets for recycled materials.

Waste emissions trading

Discussions on waste emissions trading highlighted concerns about cost pressures, but IG contributions pushed further. Members argued for a stronger focus on waste reduction and recycling incentives, addressing market failure in recycling, and enabling councils to invest in infrastructure.

Local power plan

The committee considered the Government's new Local Power Plan, with IG members emphasising the role of councils as key delivery partners. Strong support was expressed for community and municipal energy – the 'municipal' seemed a bit forgotten – alongside concerns that national programmes are not adequately engaging with local government. The Minister promised to involve the LGA in co-design.

Statutory duty on climate and nature

The new committee inherited an LGA position supporting a new statutory duty, stressing the need for accompanying powers and funding, from the former Local Infrastructure and Net Zero board. IG members had championed this on that Board, and we have continued to do so, which has been a constant challenge with new LGA political make up.

Warm homes

In discussions with the Minister on the Warm Homes Plan, we pushed for co-design with local authorities and better integration of long-term retrofit funding. We also took the chance to push the Minister on decoupling gas and electricity prices. At the time this was a flat 'no', so it was great to see the Government then climb down on this.

Flooding, coastal erosion – new framework of responsibilities

At my request, the Committee examined flooding and coastal erosion as the current split responsibilities will be thrown up in the air by LGR in many affected rural areas. Discussions highlighted fragmentation between agencies and inconsistent local experiences. Members successfully pushed for further work to define effective coordination and a response to the water white paper.

Licensing

There have been some really concerning proposals, with sensible locally led licensing being framed as a 'blocker' to economic growth. The LGA has given unusually robust responses to industry-dominated government proposals. We supported strong opposition to centralising proposals on alcohol licensing, highlighting the importance of public health, safety and local decision-making.

Governance and transparency

We have been active in raising our concerns about transparency and delivery within LGA structures, including the role of Strategic Policy and Oversight Committee and how committee decisions/positions are agreed and minuted.

Vice-Chair commitments

As Vice-Chair, I have supported the Chair at committee meetings and chaired in her absence. I have attended Lead Member meetings, helped set meeting agendas, and signed off press releases and policy positions in consultation with my IG Board colleagues. I am in the working group of committee lead members which has explored the statutory duty on climate. I have represented the LGA in the media on recycling issues and chaired LGA webinars on recycling and on the role of food partnerships. I have represented the LGA in policy forums and ministerial roundtables. Follow me on LinkedIn for updates: www.linkedin.com/in/emilyob/.



Photo: With LGA officer Sonika Sidhu at a roundtable with Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Climate Minister Katie White OBE MP and 3Ci (Cities Commission for Climate Investment), looking at how councils are showing leadership and unlocking the funding needed to not only decarbonise our places but to make them healthier and wealthier.

Public Service Reform and Innovation Committee



Councillor Julia Hilton

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The main focus this year has been oversight of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, with lead members meeting fortnightly to guide and monitor the LGA's lobbying on amendments. This work secured several key successes, including adding culture, tourism and creative industries to the areas of competence for Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs). A requirement was also introduced for mayors and strategic authorities to improve health and reduce inequalities across all responsibilities. Additional gains included enabling a tourist tax, granting powers to ban pavement parking, allowing gambling impact assessments, and establishing local scrutiny committees to hold mayors to account. While the Government has removed the option for future councils to adopt a committee system, some success was achieved in allowing existing systems to continue.

Despite these achievements, significant concerns remain. There is unease about the scale of powers being transferred to MSAs without sufficient emphasis on subsidiarity or understanding the crucial role of councils in delivering mayoral ambitions and these views were expressed to the then Minister for Devolution, Miatta Fahnbulleh MP. Concerns were also raised about the lack of joined-up thinking between different areas of public sector reform such as the Pride in Place agenda, reform of ICBs, policing, fire services and even Arts Council regions which threatens to undermine the ambition underpinning devolution and joint working across a place.

The proposed Climate and Nature Duty did not progress as the Independent Group had hoped due to a lack of political consensus. However, it remained included in briefing papers to parliamentarians, largely due to sustained pressure from Independent members, and engagement will continue to push for a statutory duty. This reflects a broader challenge for the LGA: as it accommodates a wider range of political groups, consensus on key policy areas is becoming harder to achieve.

Neighbourhood governance has been a major priority of this committee. Independent Group members consistently highlighted the importance of resident experience, ensuring that people can influence local governance and outcomes. They emphasised inclusivity, accountability, and recognition of the role of parish councils in future arrangements.

Several key principles were agreed: new burdens funding is essential for meaningful neighbourhood governance; strong social infrastructure is necessary for empowerment to succeed; councillors covering larger areas require support to manage increased workloads; service design must reflect lived experience; and health, police and fire services should be embedded within neighbourhood governance frameworks.

The committee also discussed the reintroduction of place-based budgets through the Cabinet Office's Test, Learn and Grow programme. The origins of Total Place had been to reveal how public money was spent in a local area and to catalyse better, more collaborative ways of addressing shared challenges. Members wanted to see wider rollout, as well as concrete examples of success where solutions had been found to issues residents genuinely cared about. Successful examples rely on coalitions of willing partners across councils, communities and major public services.

Looking ahead, the committee will oversee LG Horizons, a programme examining the future of local government to 2040.

Fiscal devolution is now firmly on the Government's agenda and the LGA will advocate for greater local revenue-raising powers, simpler multi-year settlements and stronger accountability. Independent members have insisted there must be a focus on fairness and addressing the regressive nature of the current system.

Finally, work has begun on defining rural devolution, recognising both rural and urban deprivation and considering factors such as GP provision, access to economic centres and differing local conditions.

Safer and Stronger Communities Committee



Councillor Karen Lucioni

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This year has marked a significant expansion in the scope of the Safer and Stronger Communities Committee compared to its predecessor, the Board it replaced. While the responsibility for licensing transitioned to the Neighbourhoods Committee, our committee has taken on vital responsibilities pertaining to democracy, civility in public life, and elections as part of the Local Government Association.

Throughout the year, we have scrutinised a range of government proposals, including the introduction of pensions for councillors and amendments to the standards regime for members. Our discussions have also encompassed the Representation of the People Bill currently making its way through Parliament. Moreover, we have issued joint statements with several partner organisations regarding the troubling issues of abuse and harassment faced by both members and officers. This has included collaboration with other stakeholders, highlighting our commitment to fostering a respectful environment in public service.

A number of crucial initiatives have been carried over into our work programme from previous years. Supporting councils in addressing issues of social cohesion has remained a central focus. We have promoted the LGA's guidance document titled 'Common Ground: Building Cohesive Communities,' and collaborated with Belong to deliver associated training sessions that equip local councils with the tools needed to strengthen community ties. Throughout the year, we have been actively engaging with the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion, ensuring our strategies align with evolving community needs. Furthermore, we continue to support councils through the Special Interest Group on Countering Emerging Threats, addressing specific challenges related to misinformation in its various forms.

In parallel to these efforts, police governance and reform have consumed much of our committee's time. We have provided carefully considered feedback on the Home Office's proposal to replace police and crime commissioners with police and crime boards, a significant change in the governance structure. Additionally, we have weighed in on the department's review of the number of police forces, aiming to ensure that these discussions reflect the diverse needs of our communities. The committee has also tackled pressing issues, including violence against women and girls, the use of CCTV and facial recognition technology, domestic abuse, and the roles of modern slavery coordinators, as well as protective security measures. I had the privilege of representing our committee at the annual summit of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council, as well as attending a serious violence reduction conference, where we shared insights and strategies with key stakeholders.

This year, we have also updated the LGA's guide for councillors regarding civil emergencies, adding valuable resources to better prepare our local leaders. In support of this update, we ran a webinar for members, facilitating knowledge sharing and ensuring that our councillors are equipped to handle unforeseen challenges effectively. In addition, we have been engaged in discussions with the Department of Health on the implementation of the recommendations from the second report of the Fuller Inquiry and have explored the future regulation of the funeral industry, a critical area of concern for many communities.

Overall, this year has been one of substantial growth and active engagement for the Safer and Stronger Communities Committee. As we continue to champion essential issues within our communities, I am hopeful that our efforts will lead to lasting improvements in the safety, cohesion, and wellbeing of the constituents we serve. I look forward to building on our foundation of hard work and dedication in the upcoming year. Thank you to my fellow independent and green councillors for their invaluable input.

LGA Governance Working Group



Councillor Gillian Ford

London Borough of Havering

The Governance Working Group was established as part of the LGA Governance Review in 2025. The working group oversees implementation of the review recommendations and oversight of Making Meetings Matter (MMM).

The Working Group makes recommendations to the LGA Board, amendments to the Articles of Association and Governance Framework in regard to commissioned reviews, and legislative changes. The Group also advises on the induction and training of members in formal LGA positions. It also oversees governance changes commissioned by the LGA Board and agrees and contributes to the appointment of external experts.

A staff survey was undertaken to assess the impact of the new governance implementation, which revealed that 58 per cent of staff did not think the new governance arrangements had improved clarity in decision-making. A further 44 per cent of staff believed that decisions were escalated unnecessarily or taken to the wrong level. An action plan was presented to the Working Group for consideration.

Recommendations included guidance for members around conflict-of-interest declarations, easy access to guidance, and up-to-date governance information for internal and external access.

The Group has also been overseeing the implementation of the LGA Board Alerting, Assuring and Advising policy (AAA), identifying changes and failed delivery.

With resources in place to support risk and technical advice with member development, the Group oversees the risks, financial, legal, equalities and community implications.

The challenge to any governance process, however, is the change and churn in organisational membership and how staff and members are trained to understand, adapt and implement effective governance.

The Independent Group representative on the Board fed back to the Working Group queries and concerns that were raised with them, resulting in ways to address the issues.

Governance is never static and as and when the leadership model changes, governance arrangements have to adapt and change according to the direction of travel of the organisation.

County Councils Network (CCN)



Councillor David Hitchiner

Councillor David Hitchiner is the Independent representative on the CCN Executive and Management Group. He is also the CCN spokesperson for children's services, excluding SEND and home to school transport, which is the responsibility of another Executive Member. The CCN Executive, as against its Council, has one nominee from each political group so is not politically proportionate. Much of CCN's work this year has been on the Government's devolution proposals. The CCN represents mostly county councils. The organisation has made a number of representations to Government supporting the principle that reorganisation will only deliver savings where councils have a population over 500,000. This is the collective view of most CCN member councils. As an Independent, and as a councillor in Herefordshire, I have a different view but that is something that I can only express privately. The CCN's view is very much a collective one and is non-political.

For many years the CCN has been Conservative-led. It is now Reform-led. As a non-political organisation representing CCN Counties, its approach should not change.

Local Councils Network (LCN)



Councillor Paul Harvey

Basingstoke and Deane Council
LCN Vice-Chair

This year has been momentous for the new Local Councils Network. We have always had a strong role in the organisation, but with local government reorganisation this year has been particularly critical.

There have been victories lobbying the Government and changes we have secured that make a material difference to councils across the breadth of the country. Our strength lies in our clear focus on localism, on advocacy for our sector and on championing councils connected to communities.

The District Councils Network, as it was, has always been respected in the sector for getting stuff done. It is not always about shouting the loudest; it is often about effective work with decision-makers. So, when the transformation of the organisation was mooted this year, the key phrase came back time and again: we influence and make change happen.

The conference this year was then a major milestone, with the announcement of the Local Councils Network, clear with a mission and direction of travel. We have played a pivotal role in shaping the new look, mission and message. The test of this has been the increased membership of the LCN and the positive feedback. Comments from the sector really welcoming the change have turned into action again on key legislation.

Two major actions this year have been:

- We won the battle to change the law so now councils can build 1,000 homes before the Right to Buy is triggered.
- We won key concessions at the eleventh hour in February on local government finance, which resulted in the Treasury accepting its figures were hundreds of thousands adrift of what councils had been promised. As a result, they found money to meet the gap.

This has been work delivered by a great team, and a huge thank you must go to Councillor Mandy Ewings, Councillor Andrew Mellen, Councillor Richard Siddall and Councillor Noel Ovenden. Together, we have made sure your voices are heard at the heart of the policies, discussions and decisions made.

I think it is important also to say that the culture of the LCN really matters. Its success is built on the collegiate cross-group culture. The leadership is very much focused on local government and representing the sector. So, ideology and party politics have been left at the door. In the room we pool our knowledge, experience and activity to ensure that the Government and Whitehall understand the implications of their actions on us.

We reached out this year to parliamentarians from groups to build the alliances we need to influence legislation. This speaks to the strength of the organisation as a team who work collectively to achieve results. On planning, homelessness, housing, local government finance, utilities, tourism, governance and standards, the scope of work is broad and inclusive.

This year has seen the emergence of the LCN as a strong sector champion and whatever comes from LGR we know that we have a strong voice in one of the most important representative bodies in the LGA family.

Local Partnerships Board



Councillor Adam Zerny

Central Bedfordshire Council

Local Partnerships is often referred to as one of the best-kept secrets in local government. However, this is a tag the organisation is keen to shed, and here is why.

Local Partnerships was set up 15 years ago and is a joint venture, owned by the Local Government Association and the UK and Welsh Government. When you hear the term ‘public-private partnership’ used, this is the sort of thing it means.

Lots of local councils need private sector support to improve the way they do things; maybe they’re not hitting their housing targets, or they want to set up a new venture, or they need advice on reducing costs. In each of these situations, they could try to find the resources internally, or they might recognise that with complex problems, sometimes you need external professional help.

Local authorities are notoriously averse to considering external consultants, and it’s easy to understand why; it’s a combination of the negativity attached to ‘expensive consultants’, the acknowledgement that ‘we don’t have all the answers’ might be seen as a failing, and the political dimension that it takes a brave administration to run the gauntlet of the predictable stick from opposition councillors about wasting money and throwing good money after bad.

Once a council has made that big decision to seek help, the real work starts. How do you know that the hard-earned taxpayer funding will be spent on the right kinds of help and not just a money-grabbing organisation determined to bleed you dry? And we have all heard the stories of organisations that ‘bring in the consultants’ only to see them still blocking desks ten years later.

And this is where Local Partnerships comes in; it’s state-owned and has a whole team of adviser employees and its own third-party experts. Between them it has a broad cross-section of experience through all aspects of local government.

Even in my brief time as a board member, I've seen an organisation determined to support all types of local authorities, and with a long and extensive CV of big wins. The board includes representatives from right the way across the political spectrum, alongside professionals who have worked at the highest level for local authorities, charities and the private sector.

The current Chair is Keith Fraser, and the Chief Executive, who also sits on the board, is Adele Gritten.

At the end of last year, I attended my first Local Partnerships board meeting in Smith Square, alongside fellow newbie Richard (Councillor Clewer, Conservative, Wiltshire Council). I certainly got a lot out of being part of it and I know others felt the same.

A detailed agenda covering audit, treasury, HR, targets, and marketing, gave us the opportunity to play a full part in the future of the company, to provide input, and to learn how the organisation thrives.

There is much potential for the organisation to grow and many local authorities which could benefit from its expertise.

The localpartnerships.gov.uk website provides a wealth of information on what the organisation has to offer, and this includes help for procurement, climate adaptation, housing, and waste.

Between us, we need to show all local authorities what Local Partnerships has to offer, and there is no time like the present!

Ask yourselves two questions:

- Does your local authority really know all the answers?
- Why would you want to wait any longer?

If you feel like your council could benefit from working with Local Partnerships, please drop me a line at adam.zerny@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk.

Council of Europe: Congress of local authorities



Councillor Linda Gillham

Runnymede Borough Council

October 2025 brought the final plenary of the current mandate. A sad occasion for so many national delegations who had worked together for five years and many who would not be returning for the new mandate in March 2026.

There was uncertainty for the UK delegation as the new representation will be decided under different rules so we all left unsure if our terms would be extended for one more meeting or not. This has happened and the March plenary and June meetings will be the last for the current delegation of 24 members.

The highlight of the October plenary was the presence of Vitali Klitschko, who spoke to the chamber about his experience of being Mayor of Kyiv. He had almost everyone in tears when he described the most difficult task he performed. Each time a Ukrainian soldier was killed, he presented the family with a medal. One mother came to him and said, ‘I have been here before for my eldest son, but I will not be coming again as I have no children left!’

Vitali Klitschko is a tall, imposing man; a fantastic, inspirational speaker; and he held his audience captivated. He gave us all a very human and relatable view of being in local politics in Ukraine. That afternoon will stay in my memory for a long time.

For me, the other highlight of the year was to be asked to speak at the United Nations in Geneva in October. I was asked to follow up on the paper I had given the year before on the circular economy and the role of local authorities in promoting and emphasising the importance of integrating circular economy practices across all levels of policy, infrastructure and community engagement, describing how this acts to enhance environmental sustainability and human rights.

I joined a panel that all had a focus on housing in an urban setting, but the most interesting presentation was from the Norwegian speaker, who described how they have moved from the ‘carrot’ approach of free parking or zero congestion charge for electric vehicles (EVs), because the majority of residents now use electric vehicles and there is no longer a need to incentivise consumers to move over to EVs.

My term of the Congress of Local Authorities is now coming to an end, but I shall look back on the last few years as a huge opportunity to have learned from colleagues across the 46 countries of wider Europe. I have had the chance to observe and monitor the very best and the worst of election practice at local authority level. I have visited the European Court of Human Rights and spoken regularly with the ambassador on the interactions between the Court and the Westminster Government.

The UK has very few cases before the court and these are often very personal and tragic to the families involved especially in end-of-life decisions. It is a place we know very little about and the press fails to educate us on the very important role it plays for those who have exhausted the national court system.

Finally, I would like to thank the Independent Group for giving me this fantastic opportunity to serve in the UK delegation.

Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)



Photo: CEMR/COE Seminar on democratic resilience, Brussels 2025 (© CEMR)

Councillor Marianne Overton

Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven

This was my final year as the Independent Group's representative on CEMR. As the LGA for the whole of Europe since 1951, and predating the EU, CEMR brings together our sister LGAs from 41 countries across Europe, from Iceland to Georgia. We do two things well: we exchange new solutions to common challenges and explore future initiatives and ideas; and, secondly, we develop policy that can influence decision-makers across Europe and globally.

As spokesperson on climate and environmental issues, topics of vital importance to our local authorities, and where international collaboration is most effective, I work with an excellent specialist expert group that meets regularly online.

In 2025, CEMR advanced its strategic priority to support local governments in accelerating the green transition. We worked proactively to set the European agenda on climate adaptation, water resilience, circular economy and biodiversity. CEMR continued to promote multilevel governance to give local government a central role and made a strong case for adequate funding. We developed frameworks to empower local action and to reinforce the role of local authorities in delivering the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Through policy advocacy, partnerships and capacity-building activities, we at CEMR positioned local governments at the centre of Europe's climate and environmental transition.

Working at the LGA, I was able to reflect much of this expertise on the UK Leadership Board and Government's Leadership and "Net Zero" Boards. Throughout, I have pressed to reduce emissions locally and without handing over vast areas of farmland to global companies. It is counter-productive to create further environmental and economic disasters in the long run, while roofs lie empty. I have pressed for adequate and easily accessible incentives on energy efficient measures, for planning rules to require energy efficiency on commercial and new build, and to recognise and use the latest technology in solar power on any built structure.

Climate and energy policy frameworks and advocacy

Together at CEMR, we played a key role in integrating local and regional government perspectives into major European climate and energy policy frameworks. This included active contributions to discussions on the **Clean Industrial Deal** and the **post-2030 climate and energy framework**, ensuring that local areas were properly reflected in EU policymaking.

Alongside, we at CEMR made amendments to the EU 2040 Climate Targets strengthening the importance of local councils in the final text.

Beyond European policy, CEMR has participated actively in past COP Climate Summits, and I have been fully engaged in attending these events as Europe's local government representative over the last five years, often chairing local government side-sessions and accessing global decision-makers. The location of the 2025 COP across two cities in Brazil entailed excessive cost and organisational issues, so we did not attend in person this year. Instead, CEMR jointly hosted an online 'Town Hall COP 2025' to agree local government input to the Summit. We discussed the challenges of climate change and the importance of local government in addressing it. My short speech highlighted the need to make green choices easier for residents and shared some of our members' successful initiatives, such as solar installations on council housing and energy-efficient building designs. The initiative was part of a broader global movement empowering local governments in tackling climate change.

Building climate resilience: adaptation, water and risk preparedness

CEMR strengthened the role of local government in European climate adaptation and resilience policies. CEMR developed a comprehensive position paper on climate adaptation, which addressed priorities such as preparedness and adaptation finance, and successfully lobbied to include local councils in the EU Climate Resilience Framework.

Water resilience emerged as a critical priority. CEMR contributed significantly to shaping the EU Water Resilience Strategy, ensuring recognition of local governments in water management, infrastructure investment, and climate adaptation. We highlighted the importance of multi-level governance, adequate funding, and locally driven solutions. This work was supported by collecting good practices, including some English examples: <https://ccre-cemr.org/local-insights/water-management-best-practices>

Capacity-building efforts further reinforced resilience. We worked with the **Climate Resilience Academy** and over 100 participants from Europe and Central Asia, focusing on water-related challenges such as droughts, floods, and financing resilience. In parallel, the FOSTER project advanced future governance through training and international workshops on foresight and environmental resilience, with upcoming toolkits aimed at supporting local authorities.

Advancing circular economy and sustainable resource management

We intensified work on policies to assist a **circular economy**, co-hosting a major conference on waste legislation, facilitating dialogue between local authorities, institutions, and the waste value chain. CEMR provided concrete recommendations on the role of councils in advancing a circular and resource-efficient economy.

In addition, we supported local and regional governments in preparing for new regulatory requirements, including a dedicated webinar on **Extended Producer Responsibility for textiles**, addressing upcoming obligations for separate textile collection and system design.

Sustainable mobility and urban transformation

CEMR also contributed to shaping European sustainable urban mobility policies. We advocated a balanced approach to monitoring—ensuring meaningful indicators while avoiding unnecessary administrative burdens for cities through a more streamlined reporting framework. CEMR also ensured political visibility of local perspectives through participation in key events such as the Mobility Days.

In conclusion

It has been a great privilege and pleasure to have represented the LGA and the Independent Group at CEMR. I was so keen that I apologise to my substitute, as I was never ill! I am sure that our new representatives will continue the great work and I am pleased that I am succeeded as CEMR Environment Spokesperson by another UK member, our COSLA colleague Councillor Gary Robinson (Shetland). Huge thanks to my excellent colleagues, cross-party UK representatives and to key officers, Richard Kitt and Dominic Rowles, for their endless sound advice and support. Thanks also to the Independent Group Office for their support.

Soulbury Committee



Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte

East Suffolk Council

Being part of the Soulbury Committee has been a really interesting and useful exercise in arbitration for me personally. I shadowed the work of the ACAS arbitration service years ago and this feels like a follow-on from that. Most of the time we have met as what is called the employer-side only – local authorities who employ educational psychologists (EPs) – to make decisions on the latest pay rise proposals from the employee side – EPs. We have met with representatives from their union to try to thrash out compromise wherever possible on pay increases to ‘Soulbury’ members.

EPs have a statutory role in providing advice or information to local authorities for children and young people who have SEND and are undergoing statutory Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans. EPs also play a unique and vital role in meeting the needs of all children and young people within an inclusive education system.

We have been working to something called a ‘Green Book’ SPA guide containing the spine pay points and corresponding recommended pay awards, and it is rarely deviated from as a system.

We have met three times over the past year, including once as a joint committee – meaning both employers’ and employees’ sides by way of their union – to negotiate pay claims.

As we all know, county and relevant unitary authority budgets have never been so squeezed, especially since the Cameron Government in particular, and councils are simply not able to keep pace with the requested pay rises in general. The Soulbury EPs are no different.

On the last occasion we met, although the Soulbury Officers' side did eventually accept our pay offer for 2025, we did however agree as part of that settlement to consider the SPA system and London Area Payments going forward.

The employees' side (Soulbury) are saying the lack of an inflationary pay rise has been causing:

“Major recruitment and retention problems have developed as a result of the failure to properly value Soulbury Officers” and that a pay increase of at least RPI (retail price index) plus five per cent on all pay points and allowances will begin to address the “substantial real terms cuts to Soulbury pay and this rise from September 2026 is essential”.

We are therefore facing another claim from the Soulbury union representatives and an employer side only meeting has been scheduled for next month to discuss the above pay claim for 2026.

Independent Group Office Report



Abigail Gallop

Head of the Independent Group
Local Government Association (LGA)
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I want to start by thanking my fantastic team, Noleen and Lioko, and Grace Clover, who joined us for six months as our Impact Graduate. They have all worked incredibly hard this year, consistently going above and beyond, whether delivering our Group Annual Conference, supporting councils through changes in administration, contributing to improvement work, or managing a high volume of press sign-offs.

We are a small team delivering a broad and complex workload. Alongside supporting our 3,000-strong membership, Executive and Leadership, we play a central role in agreeing LGA policies, positions, press activity and publications, ensuring they reflect member expectations and political consensus.

We support members across policy boards, committees and the LGA Company Board, responding to Government announcements and consultations, providing briefings, meetings and training on key issues.

Working across the organisation, we collaborate with directorates, regional teams and leadership to ensure the LGA remains member-led and politically astute, targeting support where it is most needed. We also deliver our own conference, contribute to the LGA Annual Conference, support party conferences, and work with MPs and peers on legislation.

The breadth and variety of this work make the Political Group Offices incredibly rewarding places to be.

Highlights of 2025 to 2026 have been:

- Our new leadership, welcoming Councillor Hannah Dalton as our new Independent Group Leader, alongside Councillor Andrew Cooper as Deputy Leader and Councillor Johnny Denis as Treasurer.
- The energy and buzz of the LGA Annual Conference 2025, held in Liverpool
- The quick turnaround needed to appoint to all the new LGA Committee positions.
- Working with dedicated and knowledgeable members on the LGA committees
- The appointment of our new Political Adviser, Lioko Mabika.
- The range of work on emerging legislation, particularly the Devolution and Community Empowerment Act.
- The final evidence sessions from the LGA to the COVID-19 Inquiry – a huge amount of work across the organisation on behalf of our members in a collective legal endeavour.
- The new Executive away day, establishing our high-level priorities and focus for the year.
- The Green Party Conference in Brighton, where it was fantastic to meet so many of our Green members and tell them about the LGA
- The energy and commitment of this year's Next Generation Cohort over their three, two-day modules at the Warwick Business Centre
- Our fantastic Independent Group Annual Conference, held in Leeds, with great speakers, networking and atmosphere.
- All the tension and fast-paced work around the local elections with our national and regional lead peers, particularly supporting our members in navigating new political make-ups

Finally, I would like to wish our Green councillors luck as they transition out of our Independent Group into their own LGA Grouping. I look forward to working with your future Head of Group Office at the LGA.



Lioko Mabika

Political Officer to the Independent Group
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As the busy and productive year comes to a close, I would like to begin by thanking my colleagues in the Independent Group Office for their support, professionalism and commitment throughout the year. I would like to thank Abigail, whose leadership and guidance have been invaluable, alongside my colleague Noleen, who continues to provide excellent support to our members. I would also like to welcome Grace, our newest team member, and thank her for the positive contribution she has already made to the team.

One of the highlights of the year was attending the Executive Away Day in Reading. Bringing together the Group's leadership team in person provided an important opportunity to reflect on our purpose, priorities and ambitions. The discussions held during those two days helped establish the foundations that have guided much of our work throughout the year, particularly around strengthening independent representation, supporting local leadership and ensuring that the voices of our members continue to be heard within the wider local government sector.

Over the past year, we have also invested time in developing our online content and member engagement. This has included the continued delivery of our Be a Councillor content campaign, which seeks to encourage more people from all backgrounds to consider standing for election and serving their communities. Working with councillors and sector partners, we have created practical and accessible content to help demystify local government and showcase the positive impact councillors can have in their local areas.

Looking ahead, we hope to build on this work by expanding our digital content offer, increasing member engagement opportunities and continuing to promote independent local leadership to a wider audience.



Noleen Rosen

Political Assistant

Local Government Association (LGA)

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The past year has been both busy and rewarding, providing opportunities to support members, contribute to key priorities and help strengthen the work of the Independent Group.

Reflecting on the year, I am proud of the role I have played in supporting activities that have brought members together, developed leadership capacity and ensured the Group continues to provide practical and effective support to councillors across the country.

A key focus has been the planning and coordination of major Group events, including the Executive Away Day and the Independent Group Annual Conference in Leeds. These events provide valuable opportunities for members to network, share experiences, develop new skills and discuss the challenges facing local government. The positive feedback received reinforced the importance of creating spaces where councillors can learn from one another and help shape the future direction of the Group.

I was also pleased to support the appointments process for the LGA Policy Committees, helping ensure members had the opportunity to contribute their knowledge and experience to policy discussions across the wider local government sector.

Following the local elections, my work increasingly focused on supporting the sector-led improvement programme. Working closely with our National Lead Peer, regional Lead Peers and regional teams highlighted the value of collaboration and peer support in helping councils respond to change and strengthen governance.

Looking back, I am proud of the contribution I have made and remain committed to supporting members and helping the Group build on its achievements in the years ahead.



Photo: Member Peer Training



**Councillor Hannah Dalton
Chairing at Green Party
Conference**



Councillor Hannah Dalton, Abigail, Lioko at Westminster Palace



Councillor Jim Hakewill at LGA Peer Conference



Councillor Hannah Dalton speaking to attendees at LGA Green Party event



**Abigail Gallop, Councillor
Julian Dean, Councillor
Hannah Dalton, Councillor
Johnny Denis, Councillor
Andrew Cooper, Lioko Mabika
at Green Party Conference**

**Leadership Award - Councillor
Hannah Dalton, Councillor
Caroline Jackson with
Lancaster City Councillors
at Independent Conference**



**Councillor Jim Hakewell,
Councillor Kevin Foster,
Councillor Hannah Dalton at
LGA Conference 2025**

**Councillor Andrew Cooper, Councillor
Hannah Dalton, Councillor Johnny
Denis – Group Leadership team**





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