

Daring to be different

Annual Report 2016/17



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Introduction

This year's annual report provides an impressive summary of the Independent Group's activity in 2016/17. It draws from our leadership peers, board and committee representatives to demonstrate how much we have achieved over the last year.

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

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

This report explains how members have contributed to the national debate on key issues such as housing, social care and business rates; how we fought for fairer funding for local government and a long term solution to the health and care crisis; maintained the pressure on government to properly fund our roads and infrastructure; continued to support the campaign for proportional representation; and been a critical voice in the Brexit negotiations to ensure local government is at the heart of future decision making.

The success of our work in supporting Independent Group members, helping raise skills, profile, and reputation is demonstrated in remarkable successes in all corners across our two countries and in all of our groups.

Through the LGA Independent Group, members from across England and Wales dare to be different and work together to be a positive voice for local government. In this report you'll see some of the outcomes the group have achieved and some of our aspirations for the year ahead.





Leader of the LGA Independent Group

Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

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

Key role for Independent Group members

The blue tsunami of May 2017 resulted in flash floods in some areas, sweeping away some excellent local councillors. In other areas, our members held their own or gained as Mr Corbyn struggled. After an exceptional run of increase, our resilient group has held fast with over 2250 councillors, well ahead of the Lib Dems in number.

Our group remains the most diverse and the most representative of the public. Our members are elected on our own merit, keeping close to our communities. Hence it is our voices that are most needed, crafting better solutions both locally and nationally.

We do now get our voices heard, resulting in better profile and extra funding; for example, we achieved extra money for rural areas and potholes last year and £2 billion for adult care was agreed this year.

This year our group worked hard on increasing the number and breadth of connections for our members, to help make a stronger and more cohesive voice. This has resulted in the highest ever attendances at our national, regional and monthly events, 'Be a Councillor' workshops and engagement with our email think tanks.

Through events and individually, we organised more and better training, along with information and support through the office and our accredited peers. My weekly bulletins are carefully researched and designed to keep you and me at the forefront, embracing innovation and changing laws that affect our residents.

More of our members than ever have used their LGA-boosted skills as a springboard, speaking at conferences and in the media and giving evidence to government, leading in our communities, nationally and in Europe. The resulting greater respect and influence

nationally reflects well on us in our councils and in the media.

Drawing on our members' interests, our group has worked hard on getting more funding for our councils and developing some innovative ways of delivering services. We campaigned against disproportionate 'growth' without adequate infrastructure and against forced academisation without quality. We called for genuine devolution, as led by Cornwall and Mansfield, and raised concerns on some proposed models of devolution to new mayors covering huge and diverse geographical areas. We promoted the movement towards more representative local government. We increased our work on Europe, focussing on getting any money and power returned from Europe into local government, not held up in Whitehall or Cardiff Bay.

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

The next phase

Thank you to our Group Executive and to all members who continue to contribute greatly with flair and skill.

I am determined to ensure our councillors have the power, ideas and funding to create the thriving communities we deserve. Skilled and well-informed, our members are the rising powerhouse of innovative local government. We listen and craft creative solutions at local, national and European level to tackle the economy, Brexit, green issues and alternative funding sources.

We need to continue to attract the best and build election success, especially getting to grips with improving media coverage.

Thank you for your solid support since my election two years ago. Since then I have been determined to put our members ever more firmly on the map; successful and inspiring.

LGA Independent Group Successes to date

Members supported and well informed

- An increase in contact with the Independent Group office by members seeking support, advice and answers on policy and procedure, with advice given to well over 100 councillors this year.
- An increase in the number of prospective councillors and parliamentary candidates contacting the office for advice and guidance.
- An increase in peer support requests to the group office and regional peers, via group members and councils. This year our peers have given 1:1 mentoring, group support, taken part in corporate peer challenges (CPCs) spoken at events and facilitated development programmes.
- 55 members took up places on the LGA Leadership and Development Programmes this year, including members who had not previously engaged with the LGA.
- High member attendance at the Independent Group Conference in November 2016 and at the annual Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) conference.
- Constantly increasing numbers attending our Information and Development Seminars, including those utilising dial in options. This year meetings contributed to LGA responses to the Autumn Statement, housing and education. Information sessions were also offered on scrutiny, the role of the monitoring officer and the role of the Section 151 officer.
- Five regional meetings were held in Caerphilly, Brighton, Bury St Edmunds, Bishop's Castle and Lincoln. The events focused on issues pertinent to the local regions and national policy priorities.

Leading national policy

- Continued to be expertly represented on the LGA's boards,

committees, outside bodies and task and finish groups by our members.

- Increased our think tank activity and directly informed LGA policy work and consultation responses via evidence gathered from think tank members.
- Ensured our key messages were heard in the LGA and beyond by amending key press statements, policy documents and consultation responses on issues including housing, business rates, the environment, social care, education and funding.

Raising our profile

- This year we stepped up our support for those interested in standing as a councillor within our group's membership by holding 'Be a Councillor' events in London, Caerphilly, the Isle of Wight and Brighton. We updated our marketing material and worked in partnership with the Electoral Commission to make sure we are giving the most up to date advice to those who contact the group.
- We have continued to lobby the national, local and trade media on the issue of fair and proportionate coverage for Independent election candidates.
- The number of national conferences members have spoken at increased, helping to raise the profile of Independent councillors and the wider group. These have included the national Multiple Needs Conference, the District Councils Network and County Council Network conferences, Fawcett Society events and many key culture, tourism and sport events via our chairman of the LGA's Culture Tourism and Sport Board.
- Through increased activity with our Vice-Presidents, via our annual lunch as well as policy meetings on issues such as children, social care and the environment, we have continued to raise the group's profile with our members in Parliament and Europe
- Increased activity with outside partners including NALC and the Centre for Mental Health, to raise awareness of our members and key local issues.

The year ahead

So what comes next? Some of our priorities will be to:

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

To our new members who joined us in May 2017, welcome to the LGA. As a member, you have the facilities and our small staff team to support your work as a councillor and you have a route to directly influence national government, helping keep them in the real world.

To all, thank you for your talent, skills and time given to local government and to our residents. This work matters to each one of the millions of people our councils serve every day. The mettle and determination of our councillors is needed now and increasingly in the future.

Thanks from the Independent Group Executive

On behalf of the Independent Group's Executive thank you to everyone who has contributed to the group over the last year.

We have gone from strength to strength, informing LGA's positions on key issues, challenging traditional party politics and ensuring the voices of our residents are heard at the highest level.

To the group's leadership in 2016/17 – Councillor Marianne Overton MBE, Peter Reeve MBE and Bob Dutton OBE – our board and committee leads, task and finish group representatives, group and party leaders, member peers and champions across the country, your support over the last year means more members have engaged with our events, bulletins and think tanks making our voice in the LGA and beyond louder and more effective.

To our Vice-Presidents, your continued representation in Parliament, Europe and at various events across the country provides vital support for local government and the issues that matter most to our residents.

To our group office staff – Sarah Woodhouse, Vanessa Chagas and Noleen Rosen – thank you for your brilliant work for the group.

The last year has held mixed fortunes for some of our members, and we lost many good councillors in the local elections, however we also welcomed new faces, made impressive gains, leading and holding the balance of power in many councils, and once again demonstrated there is an alternative to the traditional politics of Westminster.

Overall, 2016/17 has been a very successful year and we wish you all the very best for the year ahead.



Group Budget Report 2016/17 and 2017/18

Councillor Bob Dutton OBE

Wrexham County Borough Council
LGA Independent Group Treasurer

2016/17 budget report

In the last financial year the Independent Group had a budget of £17,800, which was a slight decrease on what had been expected.

However we once again made our budget go far by delivering positive outcomes throughout the year. We held our annual conference along with meetings in most of our regions across England and Wales; we continued to provide development opportunities for members and updated some of our branding materials.

We had a more substantial underspend this year, of £3,024. This was due to a number of expected costs being moved to the next financial year, including our group elections which account for half of the underspent amount. There was also a slight dip in expenditure over the summer due to a period without a Head of Group Office. This underspend is uncharacteristic and the corporate finance team understand the extenuating circumstances this year which led to our underspend.

Although our core budget was underspent we utilised other sources of funding to deliver bespoke programmes for our members. We held our third annual Next Generation programme for aspiring leaders; provided a range of support through the Be a Councillor campaign; and targeted support for our group's mayoral candidates ahead of the combined authority elections.

2017/18 budget

Our activity budget for 2017/18 has been set at £19,410 which is an increase on last year and will support the group to effectively hold its group elections, increase our regional activity, continue to provide development opportunities and to produce more resources targeted at the things that matter most to our members.

I will not be continuing as a councillor following the latest local government elections, this is my final report to the group.

I should like to thank all Independent Group members for their camaraderie and friendship over many years and their commitment to 'the Independents' cause' which has ensured a much greater influence over local government and also, quite possibly, national affairs. The hard work of Paul, Maggie, Carl and latterly Sarah as Heads of Office, together with Vanessa and Noleen in making this possible must also be recognised and appreciated.

Lastly, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the previous leaders of the group, Mr Lee, Chloe Lambert, Keith Ross and more recently Marianne and Pete for their drive and friendship in taking matters forward and expect to hear of further improvement in the group's affairs when the new leadership is settled.

On behalf of all Independent Group members, the Executive would like to offer special thanks to Bob for his years of guidance and support as our group Treasurer and a dedicated member of the LGA Executive. We wish you all the very best for the future.



An update from our lead member peers

Councillor Mike Haines

Teignbridge District Council
National Lead Member Peer

Independent Group peers have continued to give support and advice to members across England and Wales. This year we have increased the number of regional lead peers from four to five (within the same overall budget) to increase our regional support. They are:



Councillor Colin Mann, Regional Lead Peer:
London and the South East, plus the Plaid Cymru
councillors in Wales



Councillor Graham Brown, Regional Lead Peer:
West Midlands and North West, plus the Independents
in Wales



Councillor Phelim Mac Cafferty, Regional Lead Peer:
East Midlands and East England



Councillor Shirley Pannell, Regional Peer:
North East and Yorkshire and Humberside

At a regional level our work has included providing support for lone members; helping to resolve ongoing disagreements; advice to group members where there was a change of control; leadership support and mentoring; advice on policy issues and advice on protocols.

There have also been regular meetings as part of the LGA's sector improvement discussions and dedicated support to Welsh and county councils following the local elections.

In addition to our regional peers, we have a strong pool of 27 member peers who have supported councillors in various ways. This year peers have undertaken two CPCs at district councils, one communication peer challenge and one procurement challenge. The team have provided 1:1 mentoring support and advice in areas including budget setting, social care and regeneration, as well as co-facilitating workshops on issues such as prevention and health, children's services, planning, finance and new councillor inductions.

Our peers have also attended various development days along with the LGA's peer conference last September.

Next Generation

I helped facilitate the Independent Group's third 'Next Generation' programme for future leaders. This involved three weekend residential modules in Warwick attended by 15 councillors. The feedback from this was very encouraging, and it is good to see many former participants go on to leadership roles within their councils and the LGA.

Corporate Peer Challenge

One of the key benefits of LGA membership continues to be the sector-led support on offer, including the CPC. This year an independent evaluation of the CPC programme was undertaken by Cardiff University which demonstrated again the value of the approach and the importance of councils taking up this offer. 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 chair, leader, and chief executive.

Looking forward

We are always keen to do more, and the number of requests for peer support, via the group and the LGA more widely, has increased this year and the expertise of our peers is recognised in each region. This is due to continue in the year ahead as we respond to the changes that follow the general election; continue to hold the balance of power in no overall control councils; and face more local elections in May 2018.

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





Culture Tourism and Sport Board

Councillor Ian Stephen

Isle of Wight Council

Chair, Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

This will be my last annual report, as my third consecutive year as Chairman of the LGA Culture Tourism and Sport (CTS) Board ends in September. The board continues to be very active and this year hosted speakers from Visit England, Visit Britain, and the Tourism Alliance, The National Archives, Arts Council England and others. The CTS Board has moved positively forward during the last term, and we will still be running our very successful Leadership Essentials courses for elected members in 2017/18. The revitalised CTS conference attracted many keynote speakers, including Dame Kelly Holmes, and reports have confirmed that 2017 was the best received.

I am pleased to report that the CTS Board has helped in shaping the national political agenda and made decisive interventions on priority issues for councils. It has made a significant difference to LGA member councils, whilst contributing to LGA corporate campaigns, taking part in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) Museums Review, part of the Culture White Paper and making representation to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. In addition, the CTS Board put forward a joint submission with the LGA Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board, to DCMS culminating in reopening applications for the bidding for the UK host of European Capital of Culture.

Key achievements include supporting councillors to lead transformational change, securing a re-balancing of national sports funding, supporting the publication of 'Ambitions for Public Libraries in England' and delivering a successful annual Culture, Tourism and Sport Conference in Bristol in February 2017.

We continue working closely with Sport England in delivering the strategy 'Towards An Active Nation 2016-2021' ensuring that councils and local partners are central to their plans to tackle inactivity by re-balancing funding away from national organisations towards local initiatives. Arts Council England and Sport England continued with financial support for the LGA CTS political leadership offer this year.

Through the board I initiated new links with the Football Association (FA) and created the foundation for the FA to work more closely at local level and negotiated board representation on the London Marathon Charitable Trust which will give opportunity for LGA input and a greater national reach.

This year, I provided the joint foreword to the LGA DCMS 'Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021' by the joint LGA DCMS Leadership for Libraries, and The Libraries Taskforce secured £4 million for the Libraries Opportunities for Everyone Fund. Meanwhile a joint publication with the Chief Culture and Leisure Officers' Association 'People, Culture, Place' celebrates good work and practice of culture in placemaking by local authorities.

The board also submitted evidence to the National Archives' consultation on a future vision for archives by attending The National Archives Expert Panel.

Finally the CTS Board submitted a response to the Arts Council Tailored Review, which gave support to the re-balancing of funding across the country and redressed the balance between London and our more rural cultural offering.

I have enjoyed my time on the board immensely and would like to thank Councillor Geoff Knight, the policy team at the LGA, , the members of the Independent Group think tank for their essential input and others for their contributions and support for the board's work over the last three years.



Community Wellbeing Board

Executive Elected Mayor Kate Allsop

Mansfield District Council

Deputy Chair, Community Wellbeing Board

In my first year as Deputy Chair of the Community Wellbeing Board I have attended all Board meetings, an away day board and a very interesting joint event of the Children and Young People Board and Community Wellbeing Board looking into children and young people's mental health. I also chaired a workshop on health and social care at the LGA Conference in Manchester.

As a group the Independent representations to the board have been focused on adult social care, integration and better care. We have looked at the future of funding for supported housing, the sugar levy, and Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STPs). By far the largest piece of work we have carried out has been looking at the funding of adult social care, along with the LGA submission to government which influenced the significant increase in spending, however, not to the level suggested and required.

I have spoken about supported housing and a scheme which Mansfield has piloted regarding early hospital discharge, which has created a saving of £1.4 million. The scheme, which won the NICE Shared Learning Awards for 2017, has currently supported 1,129 patients and is saving the NHS 5,078 bed days. If this initiative was rolled out across the country the savings for the NHS would be huge.

Integration and better care has been a constant policy theme. Government has emphasised its commitment to driving the scale and pace of integration as a means of achieving better, more joined up services, by improving health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals, and reducing dependence on high intensity and high cost services. The total pooled budget is now £5.3 billion, which is significantly more than the £3.8 billion minimum pooled budget mandated by the Government.

At the joint board meeting lead members of the LGA Children and Young People Board, along with the Community Wellbeing Board agreed actions they want to focus on, to support work on this agenda. The outcome from the board was nine recommendations to engage influence and discuss.

The board continue to press for further support to tackle child obesity in their local areas.

At the January 2017 Community Wellbeing Lead Members meeting, lead members requested a paper exploring how local government should influence government policy in relation to the allocation of funding from the soft drinks industry levy.

Finally I was asked to deliver a speech and take questions on multiple disadvantage on a panel of four speakers in Milton Keynes, alongside one of our Vice-Presidents Lord Victor Adebawale. Feedback from that session has been very positive.

Community wellbeing remains a critical issue for councils as well as the national government. The board is well placed to challenge the things that hinder our ability to support our residents and champion those that work. I look forward to another busy and effective year ahead as we continue to campaign for a sustainable solution to the care and wellbeing needs of our communities.



Resources Board

Councillor Clarence Barrett

London Borough of Havering

Deputy Chair, Resources Board

Against the context of a rapidly changing, challenging and demanding financial background, Councillor Linda Van den Hende and I had a very busy year dealing with consultation responses, input into policy development and delivering workshops and seminars.

The board focussed on four key policy areas: local government finance, EU funding, welfare reform and workforce. I took on the responsibility for the EU funding policy group and was the Independent representative on the LGA Business Rates Task and Finish Group. Given the breadth and scale of activity over the year, below are just some of the highlights:

EU funding – the focus of this work included securing the quantum of £5.3 billion funding up to 2020, establishing a post-Brexit domestic regional aid programme, procurement, state aid and economic development. To give councils the strongest possible negotiating hand, the LGA commissioned independent research to compile case studies to support the continuation of EU funding post 2020 and an evidence based report which will recommend the design and delivery of post-EU domestic regional aid.

Welfare reform – this priority examined the impacts of continued reform and Universal Credit roll-out. Specific themes included making the case for adequate and appropriate funding for the local safety net, homelessness prevention, housing affordability and how devolution of funding could be directed to support the most disadvantaged jobseekers.

Workforce – this priority focussed on areas such as the National Living Wage, pay and conditions, skills gaps, apprenticeships and the treatment of sleeping-in arrangements.

Local government finance – The 2017/18 settlement included a four-year deal, the option to increase the social care precept to three per cent and a one-off adult social care support grant, funded from a £241 million reduction in New Homes Bonus (NHB). Further cuts to the public health budget and the introduction of a minimum 0.4 per cent growth threshold to qualify for NHB were some of the challenges contained within the settlement. However, further lobbying by the LGA and partners saw the release of £2 billion of new money for adult social care.

Business rates – the full retention of business rates, along with the Fair Funding Review, is probably the most significant change to local government funding in a generation. Due to be implemented by 2020, the importance of getting the structure, formulae and criteria right is vital for every authority. The principle issues include new responsibilities for local government, re-sets, appeals, local growth zones, pooling, tier splits, safety-net mechanisms and incentives. In respect of the recent revaluation, LGA representations helped secure an additional £300 million for discretionary business rate support.

I have tried to keep the Independent Group think tank updated on the work of the board through regular updates and members shaped a number of submissions to consultations including those on the Local Government Finance Settlement, Discretionary Business Rate Relief, New Home Bonus and 100 per cent Business Rates retention.

As this was my last year on the Resources Board, I would like to thank all colleagues for their contributions, kind assistance and officers for the excellent standard of professional support and advice provided throughout the year.



Children and Young People Board

Councillor Gillian Ford

London Borough of Havering

Deputy Chair, Children and Young People Board

My first year on the CYP Board started with a visit to 'The Jungle' and the relocation of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). The LGA welcomed local authority participation in the National Dispersal Scheme and UASC lead members continued ministerial and council meetings.

The Independent Group think tank were vocal on the schools that work for everyone Green Paper and grammar schools. The board agreed to engage constructively on the issues including educational attainment for all, local government's place-based role, new schools and the relaxation of selection in faith schools.

Alan Wood presented his report on The councils' role in education and children's services and the Department for Education's (DfE) impact on removing the Education Services Grant on school effectiveness. Lead members established regular meetings with Sir David Carter, National Schools Commissioner, to improve relationship development with Regional Schools Commissioners.

Lead members of the CYP and Community Wellbeing Boards discussed children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, proposing the development of guidance for Health and Wellbeing Boards and scrutiny members, highlighting prevention, accountability and exploration of transitional services from children to adults. Additionally I participated in the 'Improving the mental health and wellbeing of looked after and adopted children and young people and care leavers', expert group final report due Summer 2017.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny National Debate, 'Putting Children First – innovation in the delivery of Children's Services', considered the

DfE's Innovation Programme, media negativity of social workers, LGA sector-led Improvement and the OFSTED inspection framework.

The APPG for Children inquiry into children's social care, focused on the inflexibility of the Single Inspection Framework, no consideration of varying size of councils, the increasing number of Looked After Children, local integrated partnerships and concerns of transferring improvement to a third party.

A Task and Finish Group on the Future of Children's Social Care Improvement, was established meeting regularly with the intention of publishing a report in the summer.

2016 National Children and Adult Services (NCAS) conference sessions included improving the mental health and wellbeing of looked after and adopted children and young people; discussing the voice of the child, CAMHS, and tackling radicalisation and preventing extremism in schools.

The Family and Alcohol Court considered its function and sustainability. There were mixed thoughts on its success with funding central to the offer. The Centre of Expertise on child sexual abuse was launched and the Metropolitan Police launched the RSA 'Safer Together Report – Protecting London's Children'.

The regional adoption agencies debate considered declining children numbers in the adoption system and adoption support. Updates have been received by the board on The Children and Social Work Bill: Power to test different ways of working and The National Youth Agency discussed The National Citizen Service Bill going through Parliament, with agreed funding of 1.26 billion, 2016-2020.

The schools national funding formula debate continues, with the already under-funded High Needs Block, increased demand, one year of 'soft' formula, schools' budgets, removal of Education Services Grant and the impact of the Apprenticeship Levy.

Next year promises to be just as busy.



Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board

Councillor Julian German

Cornwall County Council

Deputy Chair, Economy, Environment,
Housing and Transport Board

The board continued to cover a range of topics and I still maintain the remit is too broad to do all the topics under our auspices justice. The contributions and expertise of the think tank have been great and thank you to all who have contributed.

Housing continued to be a major item for the board. The LGA Housing Commission Report was finalised, we responded to the Government's Housing White Paper, the Committee inquiry into Housing for Older People, the future funding of supported housing and the technical consultation on the Right to Buy in which we called for councils to have greater flexibility over the use of receipts to invest in new supply. We also responded to the National Audit Office investigation into homelessness, as well as the Homelessness Reduction Bill and the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry into disability and the built environment.

Regarding transport, Tricia Hayes, Director General at Department for Transport spoke at the board about the Congestion Busting and Repairing Roads Fund and the benefits of Total Transport. She spoke of the over subscription of the £60 million cycling infrastructure fund, demonstrating the ambition of local authorities. I asked about the use of capital instead of revenue to finance highway maintenance. Tricia acknowledged this is a long standing ask from local government but gave no hope of a change in the rules.

The Buses Bill has been our most controversial item, due to the Cities Board stance that as long as they have franchising powers, they are not worried about others. The LGA's formal position is that it supports the overall aims of the Bill. By reforming the bus franchising

system, the Bill will provide local transport authorities with a more effective set of powers to improve and reverse the decline of services in areas outside London. We also responded to the House of Commons Transport Committee's inquiry into urban congestion.

Our chair met with the Minister for the Environment regarding waste and recycling. Independent colleagues promoted the importance of the circular economy and how keeping recycling targets and being ambitious in this area can assist both the environment and economy. Your board members consistently raised the need for greater focus on sustainability and climate change and responded to the Government's Industrial Strategy, championing the importance of the circular economy, creative industries sector and the devolution of skills. We also fed into the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into the Sustainable Development Goals in the UK and submitted to HM Treasury on the Shale Wealth Fund.

As I am finishing my term on the board I would like to thank the Independent Group for allowing me the privilege to serve as Deputy Chair of the Board. I have tried my best to understand the views of our group and to undertake the role competently and effectively. I would like to thank Rachel Eburne, Graham Whitham and Martin Fodor in particular for their assistance as substitutes and the Independent Group office for all their help.



City Regions Board

Councillor Liz Hazell

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Deputy Chair, City Regions Board

My first year sitting on the City Regions Board has been both challenging and interesting. To be the only member of the Independent Group on this board has brought its own challenge, which I have had to rise to. I have attended all the board meetings and participated in all the lead member meetings.

Key priorities this year have been devolution, growth, skills and informing the LGA's involvement in the Brexit negotiations.

Engaging communities in devolution and the LGA devolution

A number of initiatives have been developed this year including a paper which was produced called 'Shaping devolution: the role of communities and citizens'. Activities around the country were carried out in order to engage with communities effectively. There was an acknowledgement from attendees that engagement is proving to be difficult, but that a proactive approach is an important necessity. The majority of the board membership supports the creation and ongoing development of combined authorities but we now need to see them work in practice to know what comes next.

Skills and employment

One of this year's joint projects with the People and Place Board was the Work and Health Programme (WHP) with the Department of Work and Pension (DWP). We are currently, working with the Learning and Work Institute (L&WI) on developing a local public employment and skills service. This work is at the initial stage and is ongoing but is based on the urgent need to simplify the sector and clarify local government's role within it.

English local Government's position following Britain's departure from the EU, Brexit

Following the EU Referendum and the decision to leave the EU, this area of work was introduced to the board. We were asked to consider: Once Britain leaves the EU, which areas of key decision making will be transferred to government and which to local government? The board made its recommendations.

Inclusive growth

The 'RSA Inclusive Growth Commission, Making our Economy Work for Everyone' report was commenced before I joined the board and concluded with a presentation at the RSA in March 2017. It looks at the correlation between social needs and the economy. It calls for the Government to bring economic policy and social policy together, which hasn't happened historically. The report changed direction slightly after the referendum decision, to position the growth agenda in the context of Brexit.

The year head

Ongoing topics of interest for the board in 2017/18 are:

- place-based impact
- leading places
- strengthening sub-national trade and investment policy once Britain leaves the EU.

I would like to give my thanks to the officers of the Independent Group, who have supported me.



People and Places Board

Councillor John Pollard

Cornwall County Council

Deputy Chair, People and Places Board

The remit of this board is that of the rural, non-urban areas of the country. We are mirrored by the City Regions Board representing the urban areas. As in any such board, debate can be long and slow and impact quite blunt but its importance is that we share experience, rub shoulders with colleagues from all parts of the country and despite the room being set up as the Tories on one side and the others across the room, contention and dispute is rare and consensus is always reached.

However in terms of direct impact this slow, cautious and cooperative approach, with action further filtered by the LGA executive can be frustrating. However I have witnessed some brilliant challenges to presenters and the sense of togetherness and sharing of concern has always been excellent.

The Independent Group representatives were myself, as one of four deputy chairs; Councillor Amanda Martin Council of the Isles of Scilly and Councillor Chris Townsend, Surrey County Council.

I have enjoyed the role of deputy chair as it is possible to contribute to agenda setting and maintaining an effective focus for the committee.

Our key topics this year were:

Devolution: we continued to act as a watchdog on devolution as it applies (or not) to rural areas. Our work reflected what I believe to be the changing agenda, with devolution of responsibility being replaced by Government to powers for growth – economic rather than political. There was a change to the Theresa May Government

and whereas last year we participated in select committees, contribute to national report and had a strong voice, this year ministers have not come to us and I do not feel our voice has been heard in the same way.

Brexit: officers provided a great deal of information on the implications of leaving the EU and we contributed to the LGA approach to government.

Broadband, mobile and the digital divide: the board provides a great insight into the patchy provision across the country and highlights the difficulties rural areas. The attendance of Sharon White, of Ofcom was a highlight but again although she empathised she has limited powers.

Skills and employment: we have contributed to the LGA workgroup and vision and received excellent updates on the work of the LGA – especially in careers.

May I thank Sarah Woodhouse for her excellent contribution to our work. As reps, when we could pre-meet, it certainly made a great difference and I recommend that this is built formally into the process. I also suggest that if the People and Places Independent team met with the City Regions Independent team then our impact as a group could be even greater. I also hope that the think tank gains greater traction within the group.

As I stand down from the board (and as leader of Cornwall Council) may I thank both political and office based Independent colleagues for their friendship and support.



Safer and Stronger Communities Board Councillor Clive Woodbridge

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

Deputy Chair, Safer and Stronger Communities Board

The board has tackled a wide range of topics this year, relating to the safety and cohesion of our communities. There has been a keen focus on how councils can help to better protect the vulnerable, including those at risk of sexual exploitation, modern day slavery, as well as those with disabilities or at risk of harm through violence or addiction.

Councils' engagement in the Prevent and counter-extremism agenda has been a recurrent theme, with a clear, and perhaps welcome, movement towards safeguarding those who are vulnerable to radicalisation. The LGA is working closely with the Home Office to ensure that members have an awareness of their duties and responsibilities within Prevent. A nationwide Prevent member champions network is being set up and I am a member champion for the South East.

The future of Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) in the post-Police and Crime Commissioner era has been another topic covered, carrying out a review of council views, to be reported soon. There is strong support amongst councils for a continued role for CSPs, although a lack of resources to deliver community safety projects remains a clear concern.

Within the community safety workstream, the board is fully behind the National Water Safety Forum's Water Safety Campaign. It is a sobering thought that there are over 400 accidental drowning deaths a year, more than caused by fires in the home or for pedal cyclists on the roads. Local authorities have an important role to play in getting that number down.

The board has continued to keep key areas of licensing and regulation under review, in particular around gambling, taxis and public hire vehicles (PHVs). Current taxi regulations are out of step with reality on the ground and the board has recently agreed to suggest to government that the regulatory framework for both taxis and PHVs should be based on a national minimum standard with flexibility for licensing authorities to impose additional local requirements; and that taxis and PHVs should start or end a journey in the licensing authority area where they are licensed.

The board has also taken part in the ongoing Gambling Review. As part of that process the LGA has suggested a £2 maximum stake for fixed odds gaming machines. I have chaired conferences on both taxi licensing and gambling regulation.

The board has further addressed various issues relating to Blue Light services, and crematoria, coroners and medical examiners. Brexit has been a 'new' topic for the board, which is reviewing the impact on regulatory services falling under the board's remit. The board has agreed the message from LGA to government should be around 'better regulation rather than deregulation' services; preventing domestic abuse; refining the local government position on funeral poverty, engagement with the modern day slavery agenda; and sustaining a local government campaign, with partners, against Female Genital Mutilation and other illegal faith-based practices in the UK.

Looking forward, topics likely to feature in 2017/18 include the reform of fire service structures; local government's response to the Casey report; the reform of medical examiner services; preventing domestic abuse; refining the local government position on funeral poverty, engagement with the modern day slavery agenda; and sustaining a local government campaign, with partners, against Female Genital Mutilation and other illegal faith-based practices in the UK.



LGA Commercial Advisory Board and LGA Property Board

Councillor Graham Whitham

London Borough of Sutton

Deputy Chair of the Commercial Advisory Board
and LGA (Properties) Ltd

The Commercial Advisory Board (CAB) is engaged in several key LGA commercial projects and in the main, membership is linked to the Property Board (PB) which is overseeing the current refurbishment of Local Government House and the future refurbishment of Layden House.

Both of the refurbishment projects are currently on time and within budget and when completed, will enable the LGA to generate income from both its property portfolio and from its commercial offer through the CAB.

The LGA budget is looking for additional commercial income from both the current and future years' activities. To that end, the board is exploring potential opportunities to expand existing services whilst developing new areas of business. We are looking at service expansion by both taking a different approach to provision and exploring opportunities to attract big projects and innovative partnerships.

Whilst some income targets are not achieving budget a number have beaten their target resulting in an excess on income forecast. The aim of the current budget review is to assess the ability of existing services to meet the projected commercial income targets. The ultimate aim is for the new LGA consultancy, once established, to operate on a full cost recovery basis.

Ultimately we are looking to unite all LGA traded services to share business intelligence, discuss potential cross-selling opportunities and generate commercial ideas.

The LGA will need the proactive support and engagement from all member councils, not just through feedback on current service provision but and possibly more importantly, additional ones that could be mutually beneficial. We would always welcome suggestions from colleagues for areas where they feel an LGA provision could be developed.

All of us who are involved with the LGA need to sell the services that the LGA can provide to its own authorities. Not, however, just to senior members and officers but also to individual councillors whose enthusiasm can also unlock, for their own authorities, the benefits of LGA services.

The LGA is an integral part of the local government structure. It not only can deliver expertise but is, of the local government family and therefore closest to fully understanding the increasing pressures on local authorities and their ability to deliver their services. Delivery, not only in a different way but to a high standard, which understands and addresses ever present and increasing financial constraints.

All four constituent parts of the political arm of the LGA are committed to ensuring that the growing commercial thrust of the Association fully enhances and contributes towards its financial stability so that we can all have the resources to continue and grow our political influence at the national level.

In the coming years the necessity of a secure and viable voice for local government will become imperative in an era of remorseless increases in central control. We on the CAB and the PB believe we are putting in the foundations now to create the necessary financial stability and security for the future.



Improvement and Innovation Board

Councillor Ron Woodley

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Deputy Chair, Improvement and Innovation Board

Having been invited onto the Improvement and Innovation Board last year, I believe it is one of the most interesting boards I have been on – it covers a number of areas and as one of the deputy chairs, I have been given the productivity portfolio.

Increasingly councils are looking to the LGA for support in managing their costs and demand pressures. Our efficiency and productivity programme provides support to help councils in reducing costs, generating income and working more efficiently. These range from the creation of procurement frameworks of general use to all councils, through to the use of productivity experts who provide targeted support to individual councils, such as renegotiating contracts with suppliers. In addition we are increasingly hearing from and supporting councils with work on innovation, digital and data issues, and demand management. This year's programme is estimated to help councils save costs or generate income in excess of £75 million.

Other board activity has included visiting the BT Development Centre in Ipswich. It was amazing to see how far and how fast technology was advancing, but we have to remember that we do not want, or should not want, technology to be the be all and end all, especially if it causes isolation of the very people we are trying to protect and help.

It is important that councils work together on the proposals outlined in the Government's Housing White Paper, and the importance of communities and councils coming together to help residents understand what councils do for them.

It has been a central thread of the board to work with the LGA's Principal Advisors and member peers on improvement priorities, including children's services and financial management. The Cardiff University review of our CPC programme was very interesting and demonstrated the importance of sector-led improvement as an ongoing commitment, rather than a one-off exercise.

I would also like to thank Alan Finch and his team of officers who have shown how dedicated they are on this board.



LGA Fire Services Management Committee

Councillor Philip Howson

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Authority

Vice Chair, LGA Fire Services Management Committee

This year the main areas of work for the Fire Services Management Committee have been around the Policing and Crime Act; the publication of the Thomas Review on terms and conditions for the fire service; addressing equality and diversity in the service; the establishment of an inspectorate and the creation of the Fire Reform Board with the National Fire Chiefs Council which is the new name for the Chief Fire Officers Association; and the running of the annual Fire Conference in March 2017.

The Committee have responded to multiple consultations and met with key stakeholders to ensure the views of members were represented during a time of quite significant change. This included a Policing and Fire Ministerial roundtable to discuss the fire and workforce reform agenda.

There has also been work undertaken to consider Peer support in regards to the new inspection regime and governance. A consultation on proposals launched at the LGA Fire Conference.

Throughout the year there has been the sharing of best practice to highlight the important role the fire services has in recognising vulnerable people, as fire fighters are often the 'eyes and ears' of partner agencies. This was most clear during the Annual Conference workshops and the LGA's report 'An Inclusive Service: the 21st Century Fire and Rescue Service'.

All in all it has been another busy year. Following the recent local elections, Cllr Howson now stands down as our representative on the Committee and the Group would like to thank him for his contribution to this work over the last three years.

Report drafted by Sarah Woodhouse on behalf of Cllr Howson.





Committee of the Regions

Councillor Andrew Cooper

Kirklees Council

Full Member of the UK Delegation of the Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) has a particular role in the EU to be the mouthpiece for local, regional and devolved government in the EU and to particularly have a focus on how EU policy affects us at the local level.

I continue in my role as the Independent Group representative on the EU CoR. I am a member of the European Alliance Group which also contains UK members from Plaid Cymru and the SNP. My particular job at the CoR is as the European Alliance Representative on the ENVE Commission which has a focus on environment, energy, climate change and space policy. Given my professional background in energy efficiency policy this is in many ways a dream job.

This year I have been giving particular emphasis to establishing the concept of Locally Determined Contributions as a way of combatting carbon emissions at the local level. Issues like the Paris Climate Agreement very much focus on the national level when in reality a lot of positive action can be taken by local councils which could go unnoticed. I was successful at getting the CoR to suggest the concept as an addition to the workplan of the European Commission. If this is taken up its implications could be very significant and possibly global in scale.

I am the rapporteur on the Environmental Implementation Review which aims to assist countries achieve EU targets on a range of environmental targets including water quality, waste management and the natural environment. I am currently working on the recommendations to the report which may include extending the remit of the Environmental Implementation Review to include progress on addressing climate change and reducing industrial emissions.

Brexit has of course dominated discourse in the EU CoR as much as it has in other EU and UK political institutions but while we remain members of the EU the work carries on. I have pushed hard for the CoR to engage with the issue of Brexit particularly with regard to how it affects us at a regional and local level. The loss of access to ERDF and Horizon 2020 funding are of a real concern as is the community cohesion issues seen in some areas.

What I have found particularly interesting is working with councillors from around the EU helping give me a greater sense of perspective around the differing relationships that can exist between central and local governments. This has sadly reinforced my view that the UK is a very centralised country with councils having little autonomy compared with many of our European neighbours.



Congress of the Council of Europe (CoE)

Councillor Martin Fodor

Bristol City Council

Regional Member of the Congress of the Council of Europe

I became a full member of the Congress of regional and local government of the CoE in time for its autumn 2016 meeting. As a member of the UK delegation, from a unitary authority, alongside delegates of the 47 countries in the CoE, I'm part of the regional chamber. The Congress plenaries are held each six months in Strasbourg. At the same time there are meetings of the political groups, the regional and local chambers, and the UK delegation, where we usually meet our ambassador to the organisation too. This will be our primary European body after leaving the EU.

In between there's usually also another meeting of the committees, and I am on the current affairs committee. This has been discussing matters like the impacts of migration on local government, youth involvement, initiatives to tackle anti-gypsyism, and local democracy. The meticulous way internal elections to bodies like the committee take place are in themselves an explicit lesson in democratic processes for delegates, as we get secret ballots in polling booths to vote for the committee chair.

The three priorities of the CoE are democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. My first speech in the Hemicycle during a plenary was on European Local Democracy Week, which my council takes part in each October. I cautioned that we have to safeguard matters that affect local participation and democracy.

The major debates in the plenaries have focused on topical issues like the annexation of part of the Ukraine by Russia, causing heated debates between the two countries' delegations. In 2017 the topic was the actions of the Turkish government in detaining elected Mayors and media figures in the state of emergency, causing an isolated Turkish delegation to respond to many other delegates' condemnations.

Other UK delegates take part in election monitoring for local and regional elections across Europe, and report into governance and local democracy. We work together well as a national delegation, though we don't always agree on the issues, coming from different political perspectives. We always welcome the UK youth delegate to our group, and I'm impressed at the way the member countries' youth delegates take an active part in the plenaries and are clearly listened to.



Congress of the Council of Europe

Councillor Linda Gillham

Runnymede Borough Council

Local member of the Congress of the Council of Europe

A major function of the Congress of the Council of Europe is to monitor elections across wider Europe. A mission is made up of members from many countries each bringing their own expertise as all are elected members. This year as a member of the monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe I had the opportunity to go to Finland to observe their local municipality elections. This is currently the only level of local government, although regions are to be introduced next year.

Our mission involved 26 members led by officers and a member from Switzerland, other members came from the Ukraine, Russia, Estonia, France, Belgium, Germany, Albania, and two from the UK. We received three days training and briefings from the political parties, the Ministry of Justice and the media. We met with the outgoing Mayor of Helsinki who was being replaced by an elected rather than nominated Mayor for the first time.

I went with an Estonian colleague, interpreter and driver to 11 polling stations in the town of Oulu. In spite of it snowing and the sea frozen over, families turned out for a walk or cycle ride and the turnout was about 60 per cent. As one would expect, everything ran smoothly but it was interesting to note that polling stations were manned by one member from each of the eight parties standing, some of whom had been trained. All voters had to produce ID, usually a driving licence or passport and voted by writing the number of their preferred candidate on the ballot paper. The polling station counted the votes at the end of the day and sent results electronically to the town hall. These were verified the next day but preliminary results were available about 10.30pm.

A report will be submitted to the next meeting of the monitoring committee in the Ukraine in June.



Council of European Municipalities and Regions

(CEMR) Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven

Member of CEMR and Spokesperson on Environment

The LGA represents councils on three international organisations, to support our residents particularly in procurement rules, trade regimes and environmental standards that affect us locally. The three bodies cover councils in all countries, European county size regional LGAs and district-size and smaller authorities.

I represent the LGA on the Policy Committee of the CEMR. This is the European membership body which represents local government associations across Europe. This body existed before the EU and includes local government associations in all European countries, including Turkey, Norway, and Iceland. It works with the EU institutions and other international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, to lobby for the interests of local government.

The CEMR elected me as the spokesman on environmental issues, focussing on the environment, energy, climate change. I recently supported CEMR's work on the revision of the European waste framework directive which influences how we run our local waste services.

EU regulations apply today and may be in place for a number of years until each EU law is reviewed, amended or deleted. It is also important to be part of these discussions to ensure that the local dimension is understood in international debates and that we put down markers for high environmental standards, suitable for us in our local communities.

Independent Group contact details

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

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

Website: www.local.gov.uk/lga-independent

Twitter: www.twitter.com/LGA_Independent

Facebook: www.facebook.com/LGAIndependentGroup

Email: Independent.groupLGA@local.gov.uk

Sarah Woodhouse

Head of Group Office

020 7664 3206

Sarah.woodhouse@local.gov.uk

Vanessa Chagas

Political Assistant

020 7664 3224

Vanessa.chagas@local.gov.uk

Noleen Rosen

Political Assistant

020 7664 3215

Noleen.rosen@local.gov.uk



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
We consider requests on an individual basis.