

The Independent Group

Annual Report 2023/24



Cover photo:

Independent Group Weekender – Leaders, Board Leads and Executive

Contents

Group Leader's Year in Review	4
Deputy Group Leader's Year in Review	9
LGA Independent Group Budget Report	11
LGA Independent Group Board Members	12
An update from our Lead Member Peers	18
LGA Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC)	20
Children and Young People Board	22
City Regions Board	25
Community Wellbeing Board	27
Culture, Tourism and Sport Board	29
Economy and Resources Board	31
Improvement and Innovation Board	33
Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board	35
People and Places Board	38
Safer and Stronger Communities Board	40
Congress of the Council of Europe	42
Council of European Municipalities and Regions	43
County Councils Network (CCN)	45
District Councils Network (DCN)	46
Local Government Pensions Committee (LGPC)	47
Local Partnerships Board	49
Commercial Property Boards	50
Independent Group Office	52

Group Leader's year in review



Councillor Marianne Overton MBE, Vice-Chairman of the Local Government Association

Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council

Electoral success

The ascent of Independents and Green parties in the recent local elections is nothing short of breathtaking. Independents with Residents Associations gained 104 members and Greens increased by 74 members. In total, including the smaller parties, the group saw 464 members elected, a gain of 184 seats, on a par with Labour and leaving the Conservatives reeling with a loss of 474 seats.

In Wales, Plaid Cymru retained their Police and Crime Commissioner seat in Dyfed-Powys. In Solihull, history was made by the Metropolitan Borough Council welcoming its first ever Muslim Mayor, Green Party Councillor Shahin Ashraf! Similarly, in Bristol the Greens ended Labour's historic rule over the City Council taking 34 seats in the new committee system. Congratulations also to all in Castle Point Borough Council in Essex with 39 Councillors, under Dave Blackwell and Deputy Warren Gibson, where Independents won every single seat!

This does not happen by accident! Year on year, our LGA Independent Group and the supporting political parties have been providing our members with training, mentoring and advice, ensuring our councillors are inspired, skilled and well informed. The results are amazing.

Close on fifty councils are already led by Independent, Green and Plaid Cymru councillors. Many more are successful in administration or leading in opposition, bringing improvements for residents.

Our fantastic member peers are hard at work, engaging with leaders, portfolio holders and newly-elected councillors, responding to peer mentoring requests and providing post-electoral support in negotiating new council administrations and coalitions.

LGA Independent Group Leadership elected

Following our membership elections last June, the Independent Group elected Marianne Overton MBE (Independent, Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council) as Independent Group Leader, Councillor Caroline Jackson (Green, Lancaster City Council) as Deputy Leader and Councillor Andrew Cooper (Green, Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council) as Group Treasurer. Thank you to both for your excellent contributions to the Executive and the wider group, with their steadfast support and help. Following a full interview process, Councillor Adam Paynter (Independent – Cornwall) was appointed as our National Lead Peer, responsible with our regional lead peers and member peers, for supporting our councils and councillors to achieve the best outcomes for residents.

Giving Peer Support

The LGA Independent Group currently has 36 active peers, experienced and trained to support colleagues. I would like to thank former councillors Helen Grant, Judy Jennings, Paul Cullen, Phelim Mac Cafferty, Paul Woodhead and Peter Southgate for their service. We welcome two new additions to the team: Councillors Jon Hubbard and Kevin Foster, who I know will make a valuable addition to our vast network of peer talent! We are always welcoming new members to become peers, especially those from BAME backgrounds or LGBTQ+.

Helping you to shape national policy

Last July we received 44 applications to join the various LGA Policy Boards and supporting committees/working groups – a record number! Together, LGA policy boards are responsible for developing policies in their respective areas and campaigns, across every aspect of local government activity. My sincere thanks to our members and substitutes for getting involved and playing a key role in the development of policy within the LGA. Early in the year, we held a brilliant weekender to shape our shared priorities and goals as a foundation for the year, supplemented by our online 'think tanks' for everyone to contribute. Thanks to Councillor Jon Hubbard, for setting up our newly designed online version for our members to share ideas and develop policy positions within the Group, shadowing the work of each LGA board. Thanks to our Board Members who have made significant changes this year to policy, notably on planning, tackling climate change and the 'right to buy'. They are supported by members like you through the 'think tanks', bringing ideas and experience. If you have not yet signed up to a think tank, please get in touch and start contributing! Thanks also to our council leaders, whose fortnightly online meetings help shape our initiatives and strengthen our responses to Government, especially this year on funding, asylum seekers and the so-called 'devolution' deals. Thanks also to our council leaders for their support in Parliament when I spoke on funding for flood defence in rural areas – sharing a platform with Liz Truss MP.

Great training, networking and support

The Next Generation Cohort 2023/24 was our largest ever with 16 ambitious councillors from different-sized authorities, working together to become tomorrow's 'next generation' of local leaders. We welcomed expert speakers in their field such as Professor Colin Copus, RADA and current council leaders. Over a series of three weekends at Warwick Conferences, individuals focus on personal and political leadership, communication and media skills, which they can take back and use in their day-to-day council work. The success of this programme can be seen in many current council leaders, for example, 22/23 graduate Councillor Rachel Millward who now leads Wealden District Council! Together with fortnightly council leaders' meetings online, Leadership weekends and Leadership essentials", our members continue to shine.

Supporting party and Independent conferences

It was great to listen and to support our members at the Welsh Local Government Association Conference in Lladudno, the Green Party Conference in Brighton and the Plaid Cymru Spring Conference in Caenarfon. Of the 22 Welsh Unitary Councils, I was delighted to see the successes from Plaid Cymru leaders including Councillor Darren Price of Carmarthenshire, Dyfrig Siencyn of Cyngor Gwynedd, Brian Davies of Ceredigion, Charlie McCoubrey of Conwy and Independent leaders Councillor Stephen Hunt of Neath Port Talbot, Mark Pritchard of Wrexham, Llinos Medi of the Isle of Anglesey and Geraint Thomas of Merthyr Tydfil. I also thanked our Plaid Cymru Vice Presidents Lord Wigley, Ben Lake MP and Liz Saville-Roberts MP. Welsh Local Government is now facing enormous budget pressure of £750m in the 2024-25 financial year, with gaps of between £340m - £490m even after increased council tax.

It was a pleasure to attend the Green Party Conference in Brighton alongside colleagues including Councillor Johnny Denis, Chair of the Association of Green Councillors, Carla Denyer, Co-leader of the Green Party, Caroline Lucas MP and our two Green Vice Presidents, Baronesses Natalie Bennett and Jenny Jones. We discussed a socially just transition to net zero through local government and heard about the great work of Green Party councillors. Over 300 councils are explicitly committed to 'net zero' and have reflected this in their business plans, funding and staffing, with or without local government support! The LGA has also declared a climate emergency, offering a wide range of resources and tools to help local authorities combat the negative impacts of climate change. As the elected spokesperson of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions for climate and energy, I was able to showcase your work at COP28 in Dubai and at conference in Prague.

In November, we hosted our own Independent Group Annual Conference at the Wyboston Lakes Resort near Bedford, outside London for the first time. Central Bedfordshire is an Independent-only led administration, after the May 2023 local elections. The diversity of the agenda reflected the diversity of our group and as a first, we welcomed Kate Cheney MP of the Teal Independents in Australia. Kate spoke about winning strategies for global Independents and Greens and shared her own political journey in Australia. The conference gave an update on our emerging local government white paper and there were various breakout sessions covering Artificial Intelligence, Children's Services and the future of housing. The feedback from members afterwards was overwhelmingly positive, especially our 'recipes for success' workshops focussing on being an Independent or Green in administration, opposition as well as making it on your own as a local councillor. Another first was having the True and Fair Party, Climate Party, Yorkshire Party and the Democratic Network all on the same platform talking about the rise of smaller independent parties and groupings within local and national government.

Initiated and organised locally, I also supported regional events in East Midlands and East of England, NALC in Stratford, ADEPT in Birmingham and I visited a number of our Independent Group Leaders in their Councils.

Awards

Congratulations to all nominations, citations and to this year's Clarence Barrett Award winner, Councillor Sue Baxter, regional lead peer for the West Midlands and North-West region. A previous Chair of the National Association of Local Councils, Sue currently serves as a Deputy Leader of Bromsgrove District Council. Despite her own health issues, she has kept going and kept taking on more work not less! Sue is an inspiration to us all to keep going in the face of adversity. Other citations were given to Councillors Emily O'Brien, Caroline Jackson and Kevin Etheridge. Thank you for the service you provide to your residents and local communities, you are an inspiration to us all!

Campaigning for funds and powers

Despite our ongoing success story as a Group, the major issues affecting our councils still remain. For example, we continue to campaign on essential funding for our services with the LGA warning that councils in England face a £6.2 billion funding gap over the next two years. As a result, councils will still need to raise council tax and many will need to make cuts to local services in order to plug funding gaps. The Office for Local Government (Oflog) continues to loom large with its many boxes to tick, rather than the LGA peer-led improvement support for councils.

Our Group Executive took the lead in inviting Josh Goodman, who is the Chief Executive of Oflog, and stressed our concerns surrounding the duplication of data, 'early warning conversations', and questioned its operational independence.

I lead the cross-party Civility in Public Life Campaign bringing support for a cleaner, kinder politics, with toolkits and codes of conduct on the LGA website. The launch of the Jo Cox Commission report was a landmark moment in our 'Debate not Hate' campaign, which I was proud to support. Among its many agreed recommendations, was that elected members will soon have dedicated local police contact to report any incidents of abuse and/or intimidation. I also lead on these issues on the UK Forum of Local Government Leaders from across our four nations, meeting in Northern Ireland, and on the CEMR, meeting in Georgia close to the Russian border in June.

Thanks

The LGA Independent Group continues to strive and to succeed in many areas that matter to our residents and our members, including elections! My sincere thanks go to the Executive for their support and hard work throughout the year. We have been joined by four new members: Councillor Johnny Denis, Councillor Andrew Walters, Councillor Frank Biederman and Councillor Nate Higgins, each one making their own unique contributions to the development of policy within the Group. I would also like to thank our fantastic staff in the Group Office, led by Abigail Gallop. I'm pleased to say that Rodrigo Sanchez has now become a permanent member of staff in the office and Noleen Rosen has returned from her secondment to the legal team, where she worked on the COVID -19 Inquiry. Thanks also to the support networks: Independent Network, the Association of Green Councillors and the Plaid Councillors Association. Each provides a wealth of helpful resources and advice, key support for our members.

Huge thanks to our President, Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE, and to all our Vice Presidents, and also to cross-benchers Lord Best, Lord Bichard, Lord Bird, Baroness Young, Baroness Casey and Lord Adebawale, most of whom I have met during the year and who have kindly supported us in the Houses of Parliament on issues affecting our work in local government.

Most of all, my heartfelt thanks to all our members for another fantastic year. Thank you for all you do for our residents and our local communities up and down the country. I am so proud to have been re-elected to lead such an inspiring group of individuals. I shall continue to stand firm for you and on the issues that matter to you and your communities, in the LGA, in Parliament and abroad.

I look forward to the future with growing confidence and optimism in our Independent Group and all that we can achieve together, bringing our diverse and inspired thinking to work on government at all levels, improving life for our residents and our planet.

Deputy Group Leader's Year in Review



Councillor Caroline Jackson, Deputy Group Leader

Lancaster City Council

It was a great privilege to be elected by Independent group members as Deputy to Marianne in May last year. The year since has been a steep learning curve in respect of the quite weighty responsibilities that go with the post along with the very measured and well-prepared way in which the Independent group operates within the overall LGA structure.

Taking a place on the LGA Board this year has presented challenges due to very significant changes. The political landscape changed due to the election of a new Chair with new concerns, one in particular I am sure we all welcome is the need to focus on the corporate parent role of all councils for children in care. Alongside this change came the recruitment of our new Chief Executive. As a new member I have very much welcomed Marianne's dedicated support in interrogating the changes and being part of presenting our own Independent vision and integrity to the Board. The pre-meeting discussions have ensured that our Group inputs at both Board and Executive Advisory Board meetings carry weight in representing Independent concerns and values.

The role of Deputy involves much behind the scenes input and I have been pleased to be involved with the organisation of both the Independent Conference and the LGA conference. The Independent Conference was an excellent opportunity to network with both Independents and Greens. I was pleased to chair a session with input from UK100 and from Wisdom Da Costa which has led to a number of ongoing discussions and projects. It was a really well-attended conference with a great dinner and really relevant sessions. If you didn't attend this year, make sure you are with us at the next one. Our learning from LGA conference and feedback from so many of you that came is especially to make more opportunities for networking and smaller interest groups.

Week by week, the Independent group provides support to its members at different levels and I have been pleased to work with Marianne to support Independent and Green Leaders.

Their number continues to increase, and the bi-weekly network meeting provides a crucial national forum by which current and upcoming concerns can be discussed, validated and via the LGA Board and members’ meetings taken through to government level. I have been pleased to input to the meeting and support a number of discussions.

As part of the Independent Executive I also took on the leadership of the Constitutional Review that was agreed at our AGM. As with all reviews of this type it has taken a seriously dedicated group of members some time to work through and address the issues thrown up particularly by the way the group has grown in size and influence. It has been very ably supported by Abigail Gallop our Lead officer. There is never a perfect constitution but I think we can assure all Independent members that what is presented is the wisest and most well considered option that your fellow members could draft.

In conclusion, I would just like to highlight the team – Marianne, Andrew in his Treasurer role, all the Executive and of course our officers, Abigail, Rodrigo and Noleen: it is a privilege to be part of such a hard-working and effective group.



Independent Group Executive away day 2022 with Councillors Hannah Dalton, Andrew Cooper, Carolyn Topping, Tony Saffell, Marianne Overton, Craig Browne, Caroline Jackson and Georgina Hill

LGA Independent Group Budget Report



Councillor Andrew Cooper, Treasurer

Kirklees Council

This financial year, because our Political Assistant was seconded to the legal team at the LGA to work on the COVID-19 Inquiry, we were able to move some of the staffing budget into our main budget. This allowed us to fully fund our LGA Independent Group Annual Conference, with heavily subsidised overnight accommodation. It also allowed us to cover all the costs for a two-day event setting out our asks of a new government, which has been very influential in shaping the LGA's Local Government White Paper for a new government. We have also supported three larger and two smaller regional events for our members.

To help cover our Political Assistant, the Group Office hosted an LGA Graduate for six months, at an additional cost to the Group. Again, this was met through the overall staffing budget reallocation.

As a result of our increasing number of members, we have also needed to use a proportion to top up the funding we receive from the LGA for the LGA Annual Conference dinner and some accommodation for our members. Unfortunately, our increasing proportion at the LGA won't be reflected in our budget until next financial year.

Annual budget for 2023-2024: £32,759

Total expenditure for 2023-2024: £47,175.67

Total income for 2023-2024 (payment for rooms at Annual Conference): £2,112

As we look forward to the next financial year, we are keen to continue to support more regional events for our members and we will be holding another over-night LGA Independent Group Annual Conference. With a new Government, we will also want to be able to respond to any new policies and positions that emerge.

Budget for 2024 – 2025: £32,529

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An update from our Lead Member Peers



Councillor Adam Paynter, Independent Group National Lead Peer

Cornwall Council

Independent Group peers give support and advice to our members across England.

We have seven 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 Linda Gillham - Regional Lead Peer: South-East and London

Councillor Zoe Nicholson - Regional Lead Peer: Green Members

Councillor Andrew Cooper - Regional Lead Peer: Green Members

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 the 24 Change of Control councils after the May 2024 elections; leadership support and mentoring; advice on policy issues; and advice on protocols. We have seen a huge increase in No Overall Control (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 / 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 Bournemouth and Peer Conference in Bristol.

In addition to our regional peers, we have a strong pool of 36 active member peers who have supported councillors in various ways. New this year has been 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 advent of Oflog, Central Government's improvement department looking into council performance.

This year, LGA peers have undertaken 17 Corporate Peer Challenges and 2 CPC reviews. The team has provided numerous one to one mentoring support to councillors in councils which have had government interventions in the form of 'Best Value Reviews', and financial assistance. Advice in areas including budget setting, Adults and Childrens Social Care, as well as co-facilitating workshops on issues such as prevention and health, children's services, governance review, bespoke development support, planning, finance and budget support, new councillor inductions, equality, diversity and inclusion training sessions, and recovery and renewal panels.

Next Generation programme

I helped facilitate the Independent Group's tenth 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 the Independent Group Office.

LGA Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC)



Councillor Frank Biederman, Chairman LGA FSMC and Fire Commission

North Devon District Council

As I come to the end of my second year as Chair of the Fire Services Management Committee, I have reflected on the breadth of work that the committee has undertaken and the impactful role that we have played in improving and supporting fire and rescue services across England.

Our five priorities, that we recommitted to this year, are:

1. People and culture
2. Professionalism
3. Governance
4. Climate change
5. Sector led improvement.

In March 2024, I was proud to open the LGA's Annual Fire Conference in Bristol, where we engaged deeply with each of these key priorities. The Conference programme addressed issues such as sexual harassment, mental health, climate change and productivity. We also welcomed the Labour Shadow Policing and Fire Minister, Alex Norris MP, Lord David Goddard of Stockport from the Liberal Democrats and Baroness Natalie Bennett from the Green Party.

As Chair, I have represented the Committee at several external boards and events, including His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Chairs and Chiefs event in November 2023, where I reflected on the inspection regime and the challenges for the fire sector. I have also represented the LGA at the Inspectorate's Fire Performance Oversight Group (FPOG), to support services going through HMICFRS's enhanced monitoring process.

I have also been involved in the annual pay negotiations as part of the Employer's side of the National Joint Council (NJC) for local authority fire and rescue services. We have

now reached agreement with the Employees side of the NJC following a successful consultative ballot of the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) members. This pay agreement will cover Grey Book or uniformed employees from firefighters to area managers. We are proud that the NJC has demonstrated its effectiveness in dealing with a wide range of issues and in reaching another agreement which circumnavigates any threat of a national dispute.

This year, the Government published their long-awaited response to the Fire Reform White Paper consultation, which outlined the Government’s proposed reforms to people, professionalism and governance in the sector. As part of the ‘Governance’ strand, the Government have proposed that Chief Fire Officers are given operational independence from the Fire and Rescue Authority and will be consulting on a new model scheme of delegation to achieve this as part of a wider National Fire Framework review. We have been involved in informal discussions on their proposals and look forward to feeding views into their consultation over the summer.

HMICFRS have also published many reports this year, most recently, the State of Fire 2023 report. We agree with the inspectorate that there are still too many incidents of unacceptable behaviour and improving the culture and values of the sector is of paramount importance. We have continued to provide training to members on the issues related to culture and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) through our Fire Leadership Essentials programmes. Similarly, our EDI Champions Network, chaired by Cllr Jane Hugo, has continued to provide support on these important issues, bringing members around the table to share their experiences and learning.

Overall, the FSMC have had a hugely successful year, both in our work with the sector to support authorities in their improvement journey, and our influence in Whitehall by challenging the government’s priorities and making the case for greater funding and local determination of governance structures.

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



Cllr Frank Biederman at Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service



Cllr Frank Biederman at Annual Fire Conference

Children and Young People Board



Cllr Jon Hubbard, Deputy Chair

Wiltshire Council

This was my first year in post as the Independent Group Lead Member on the Children and Young People's Board.

Since being appointed there have been three Board meetings and a number of Lead Member meetings.

The Board has now published its Placements for Children in Care Resource Pack, the outcome from the Children's Placements Working Group last year which I was a member of. The pack provides all councillors with an understand of what "good" looks like in children's placements, and issues to consider improving local sufficiency. Following the completion of the report the Chair of the Board wrote to the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education, alongside colleagues in SOLACE and the Association of Directors of Children's Services, to highlight our significant concerns around the availability and escalating costs of placements for children in care. This letter was followed by the results of the LGA's survey into high-cost placements for children in care, which showed a sharp rise in the number of placements costing at least £10,000 per week.

The Board has also updated the popular Corporate Parenting Resource Pack to support all councillors with their Corporate Parenting responsibilities – a really useful read that I would thoroughly recommend.

In October, I chaired a webinar for councillors on supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, which was well attended by councillors from across the country.

Also in October we launched the LGA's campaign to improve support for care leavers, #StepAhead and published a letter in the Daily Express calling on councils and small businesses to sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant.

At the end of October, we published the latest update to our work on profit-making and financial risk among the largest independent providers of children's social care placements. This received exclusive coverage in the Observer and continues to be well-used by councils as we work to address the challenges in the 'market'.

In November we submitted a response to the Government's second consultation on the mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse, highlighting significant concerns with the impact assessment for the policy and a lack of support for victims and survivors.

November also saw the annual National Children and Adult Services Conference (NCASC) where it was fantastic to meet up with fellow Independent and Green Councillors from across the country and share experiences and ideas.

The Board submitted a briefing in advance of a debate on the importance of good quality early years education provision and environments since the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting recent LGA research and highlighting concerns from councils on the challenges facing them in light of the expansion of entitlements.

A report was published into wraparound childcare provision, undertaken by Coram Family and Childcare. The report highlights good practice with some councils but the challenges that some areas are seeing with insufficient capacity to focus on this area.

In January the Children and Young People's Board agreed to set up a Task and Finish Group to explore the issues surrounding Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing and I was pleased to be elected to chair the Task Group. We have now met three times and are exploring some interesting ideas and hoping to report back in the autumn.

The Board also submitted a response to the HMIP consultation on inspection of youth justice services, welcoming the move to a focus on outcomes rather than process and highlighting the need for a child-focused inspection system.

In March I chaired a session at the LGA Public Health Conference and was lucky enough to also join a briefing session with some young people from the Association of Young People's Health who shared their aspirations for young people's wellbeing over the next 5-15 years.

In April I attended an event on behalf of the CYB Board organised by the Fawcett Society titled Transforming Early Childhood Education and Care: Sharing International Learnings. This was a fascinating event with a keynote speech by Harriet Harmen followed by a round table discussion with six of us taking part in a debate and audience questions.

In my role I have been appointed as the LGA member on the Board of Trustees of the NYA (National Youth Agency). This is a fantastic opportunity to understand better some of the real challenges facing the sector and I have been delighted to be invited to chair the new Impact Committee on the Board which is looking at the effect of the work the charity undertakes and how we can maximise its impact.

I have referred to a number of documents published by the Board in my report and I will place links to these on the new Independent Group Portal which is replacing the old Think Tank emails. At NCASC I floated the idea of some group meetings to talk about Children and Young People's Board business in a Teams/Zoom meeting which seemed to have a lot of interest. I will therefore look to set something up and ask the office to share the details with members – as we won't have the chance to meet at LGA Conference this year this would be a great opportunity to catch up.

City Regions Board



Councillor Martin Fodor, Deputy Chair

Bristol City Council

The Independent Group members and substitutes have taken an active part in all the meetings of the City Regions Board. I'd like to thank all our representatives for their constructive input to the work of the Board.

Our meetings have covered a wide range of topics building on the Board's previous work programme.

During the year we've adjusted our remit to take account of the new Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board and to complement the work of the People and Places Board. We've agreed our remit includes Strategic Transport and Inclusion issues, and Strategic Housing matters. In one meeting we discussed the work of the Urban Transport Group and heard from the LGAs Transport policy lead to try and identify ways to ensure better investment in integrated and active transport systems for our city regions.

We had several briefings on progress with the Levelling Up agenda. One aspect of the LGAs work included a discussion of the Future Role of Councils. We cautioned on the need for any KPIs to be used by the UK Treasury to recognise the role of local government in its own right in delivering development solutions for our authorities. They could be a very blunt instrument.

When Future Growth Funding has been discussed members stressed the need for the focus to be on well-being and the creation of thriving places, not promoting growth for its own sake.

Health Devolution has been discussed and our members contributed to a useful debate on the case for this to ensure better integration with local social care and wellbeing initiatives.

The Government proposals for Universal Support that should incorporate a role for local government were welcomed. We saw this as a valuable way to contribute to a just transition for changing economies if training can be incorporated. However, it was stressed that action to get people back into work needs to be voluntary, not punitive.

The Work Local initiative has been developed in discussion with our Board and we were able to follow up comments in the Board meeting with more detailed discussion as the report was finalised. This was to secure an emphasis on the need for industrial strategy and the role of local government in helping focus on local skills and work programmes that can support initiatives tackling net zero. We want to ensure the development of valuable new green skills and jobs to help communities thrive and adapt to change.

When discussing support for Care Leavers we've raised the issues around meeting the employment needs of ex-offenders and those not in employment education or training as well as their need for housing and health care.

For one meeting we had an in-person visit to Manchester and Salford to see some case studies of initiatives for ourselves. Of note was the strategy of building on underused surface-level car parks to create new development sites, while reducing car parking in town centres. New facilities supporting the move to more active transport complemented a reduction in traffic and new business areas.

The annual Urban Summit was held in June. I was invited to speak in a round table session entitled 'Progressing with inclusive economic growth in urban areas.'

Community Wellbeing Board



Councillor Gillian Ford, Deputy Chair

London Borough of Havering

If your council delivers social care, you will know only too well of the cost pressures this places on your authority. The LGA and Community Wellbeing Board continue to lobby government, for fair funding. This was discussed in more detail at the first meeting of the LGA year, by John Jackson Care, a health improvement advisor for national finance and Sir Chris Witty who provided a verbal update on Health Ageing.

The implications of the King's speech were outlined and consideration and proposals for the LGA's Government White Paper were worked through.

Representation was made to government over the Smokefree generation and vaping consultation. I chaired an online session, with Sir Chris Witty on the proposed Smokefree generation and vaping consultation which attracted 500 attendees. There was a suggestion that this session had had the most questions asked, which helped the development of the Boards consultation response. We were delighted to see the policy adopted all be it that we continue to challenge the level of the fine and are waiting for the legislation around the banning of disposable vapes.

The Care Quality Commission have started the role out the Adult Social Care assurance reviews. The Board have heard how this will operate and is taking learning from the first reviews. The LGA has established a Peer Review around preparedness and the board will monitor role out, challenges and implications going forward.

Obesity is a national problem and as we all know the prevention agenda can prevent the decline in an individual's health, social and economic decline. Therefore, focusing on children's wellbeing plays an important role in prevention and the board considered The National Child Measurement Programme data and the role of local authorities has to play. Incidentally, earlier this year, my council Havering launched a whole systems approach to obesity which you may like to take a look at.

Sir Michael Marmot joined the Board to discuss his work and visions for healthy cities and areas. We will be welcoming him back to discuss in more detail his ideas and to consider the wider implications as to how we can put this into practice.

We had the announcement of Right Care, Right Person during the year. There were a number of concerns raised around the broader capacity in the system, the safeguarding of others on the premises especially children. We have been working with ADASS on the implications and risks and continue to monitor authority concerns.

Since Brexit, the recruitment of social care staff has become harder and the board considered the exploitation of international recruitment to adult social care. There has been an increase in corrupt agencies sponsoring workers, without the jobs to go onto, leaving the innocent worker without employment and money; they have to find their own fares to travel to the UK and generally have limited money available to them, hence seeking work in the UK. The Government has now made it harder with the expectation they find work within 60 days if they find themselves in this position, with a call on local authorities to deal with the situation. Work is ongoing.

Culture, Tourism and Sport Board



Councillor Julie Jones-Evans, Vice Chair

Isle of Wight Council

It's been a very enjoyable and productive first year as the Independent Group Vice Chair of the Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, working with and supporting the Chair, lead members, board members and the excellent officer team. I had a great start to my role in June last year with an away day in Plymouth, which included a board meeting with Dame Tracey Crouch MP to discuss football governance and grassroots support, and a tour of Plymouth's vibrant cultural scene. The city's dynamic cultural assets truly made the visit inspirational. We are looking forward to our next board meeting in Leicester in June 2024, anticipating another enriching experience.

One of the tasks the lead members took on was to liaise with the other boards on cross cutting topics, so we can share knowledge and achieve enhanced outcomes. I have made a great connection with the Safer and Stronger Communities Board and met with fellow Independent Group members with officer support. We covered three main topics of mutual interest:

- 1. Culture:** Martyn's Law, we are committed to continuing our lobbying efforts during both the primary and secondary legislative stages to ensure that new regulations are proportionate, especially for community-run venues. We are also focusing on monitoring the impact after implementation and providing guidance and forms to assist councils and community groups with compliance.
- 2. Tourism:** We have emphasised the importance of adequately funded regulatory services, which are essential to maintaining the reputation of a destination. We are looking to developing a guide for Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs) to help them engage with their new strategic responsibilities. Furthermore, we will suggest that Visit England coordinate destination 'award' schemes, including considerations for designating areas as safe destinations.
- 3. Sport:** Developing safe public spaces and preventive approaches to mitigate violence against women and girls. We will share learning and insight from Make Space for Girls to consider a more integrated design approach to public areas and spaces, another area is on evaluating the impact of offering free leisure centre activities

to individuals referred by food banks, including refugees, and reviewing statutory requirements for swimming lessons related to water safety.

Board priorities this year also included a strong focus on lobbying for effective use of resources, especially important as we approach the end of this Parliament's cycle. Our key messages have been:

- Securing better value for money through place-based investments by the DCMS, crucial as council funding has declined significantly over the past decade.
- Advocating for the extension of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund to include the retrofit of cultural and leisure assets.
- Supporting the vital creative industries and leisure sector with a localized approach to skills and employment support.

During our November board meeting, we presented evidence to Minister Lucy Frazer, and in January, to Shadow Minister Thangam Debbonaire, showcasing the critical needs and contributions of our sector.

As councils are the largest public funders of culture and leisure – investing £2.4 billion annually – they play a crucial role in managing a wide array of national infrastructure and delivering services that are integral to community cohesion, health, and economic prosperity. Our sectors not only enrich social life but also contribute substantially to the economy, with arts and culture alone adding more than £10.8 billion annually. Therefore, when councils have less funding and have greater calls on statutory spending, our economy and community cohesion can be badly affected.

In my additional role as the LGA Library Champion, I co-chair the Councillors Sounding Board with Arts Council England. We cover a broad range of issues such as the Library Accreditation Scheme, which is set to standardise library services across England, enhancing their planning and community impact. I proudly represented the LGA at the launch of Baroness Sanderson's Libraries review and also participated in a roundtable hosted by The Reading Agency with Lord Parkinson, hearing about the success of pilot areas for The Summer Reading Challenge. The opportunity for local and central government being sat at the same table to discuss issues of national importance as literacy is at the heart of the work of our LGA.

Music is embedded into our all our lives and earlier this year I chaired an LGA webinar for UK Music to talk about the Here, There and Everywhere toolkit they have developed to support local authorities to help music thrive across the UK. The report focused on the action that towns and cities across the UK can take to use music to help turbo-charge their local economies and support jobs.

I hope I have captured some of the important elements of the Board's work this year and that it underscores local government's ongoing dedication to enhancing community life through culture, tourism, and sport, ensuring they remain vital and sustainable components of our national fabric.

Economy and Resources Board



Councillor Ian Stephens, Deputy Chair

Isle of Wight Council

I have represented the LGA Independent Group as Deputy Chair of the Economy and Resources Board this past year, with an extremely informative induction which gave me an insight into the workplan.

A working group was established to review local government finance reform, with this year financially challenging for all local authorities. The working group's 'Longer Term Funding' paper was discussed, and it was proposed that it be forwarded to the LGA Executive Advisory Board for approval with ministers also being introduced to the findings. Independent members felt it imperative that we push forward and achieve positive results which will support structured year on year spend. The contracted process will not be a short-term fix and therefore should extend beyond a review of council tax and into the opportunity of local councils seeking innovative but fiscally responsible methods of sourcing increased funding. Outdated legislation has been highlighted as an obstacle to a progressive way forward. The report, which involves collaborative input from CIPFA, SOLACE and the LGA is scheduled to be published during the summer of 2024.

Delays in the audit of local authority accounts have been a source of concern with an emphasis mainly directed on the audit backlog rather than a long-term fix. The current situation, which is not the fault of local government, leaves them exposed with possible reputational damage and a down grade of credit ratings. Government is stating that the backlog should be cleared by March 2026. However, concern has been raised by the Board that this would fall into a pre-election period and therefore should be moved forward to February. DLUHC and the National Audit Office will receive further input from the Board with a continuing dialogue. The delay (and possible lack of content) of the report has been voiced by Independent Group members with emphasis on the exposure to local councils when setting budgets.

The Board voiced disappointment that government had not brought forward adequate funding to assist in support of local authorities within their Spring Budget 2024.

Throughout previous months, the Board and the LGA have made representation to government on the continuation of the Household Support Fund which had been announced to cease at the end of financial year 2023-24. The lobbying was successful with £500m being allocated and extended for a further six months. The announcement was made after the budget setting process. Further lobbying is now being undertaken to extend the period of this much needed support or a possible replacement funding stream to support low-income households. The Board also expressed concern of the ongoing pressures and the necessity to apply both national and local funding of support which will reduce the impact on other service areas and stakeholders.

Corporate Parenting is an LGA priority, and the boards have focussed on improving support for Care Leavers resulting in sharing both views and recommendations. Within this Board suggestions were expressed that a Care Leavers Covenant could allow for local authorities to bid for grant funding streams, whilst a possible national council tax reduction scheme would envisage possible problems within two tier councils and a further consideration was made on income tax thresholds.

Throughout my year of tenure, I have been supported by members of the LGA Independent group, who have been both responsible and vocal in giving input to the Economy and Resources Board proving again the strength in depth of our number. Working informally, we have discussed and collectively taken forward valid contribution to the board on behalf of the group. My thanks for their commitment.

Improvement and Innovation Board



Councillor Alex Coley, Deputy Chair

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

It was my pleasure to take on the role of Deputy Chair of the Improvement & Innovation Board last year. The Board has had a very busy year, covering the Corporate Peer Challenge refresh, the developing Improvement and Assurance Framework, an unexpected increase in the grant for our sector support offer, debates on peer accreditation and of course Office for Local Government (Oflog). All against the backdrop of looming S114 notifications and best value inspections across the sector.

In February we hosted the Interim Chair and Chief Executive of Oflog and there was a sharp exchange of views from all attendees. In particular on role and remit. A point of contention has been the Local Authority Data Explorer which duplicates LG Inform, but with a more rudimentary interface and a less insightful approach to the different shapes and sizes of local authorities. We were also appraised of the rapid growth in Oflog's size and budget which continues to expand within DLUHC.

Following on from the work of Cllr Neil Prior, my predecessor, I have led on digital, cyber and AI, areas where I have professional experience and have made my particular focus during my years on the board. The officer cohort in this policy area are an exceptional calibre and it has been a privilege to work with and learn from them.

We have had the launch of the LGA Cyber 360, a new programme which uses a sector-led, collaborative method to provide expert guidance and feedback to local authority senior leadership and management. The programme highlights good practice that councils can employ to improve their cyber security posture and practices. The LGA Cyber 360 framework includes fourteen key assessment areas and 10 questions for a councillor to ask as well as a collection of Cyber Unpacked video modules.

We also kicked off the Leadership Essentials training on Digital Leadership, for councillors with an interest in cyber, digital and technology. The programme aims to demystify digitalisation for those new to this area and those wanting to build their existing knowledge. I was very pleased to attend these full day events in London and Warwick where I presented sessions on managing crisis with digital tools.

The Digital Leadership programme also includes coaching sessions for councils, communities of practice, an ongoing programme of content and tools targeted around themes like resilience building.

Most recently I enjoyed the Smith Square AI debate where we engaged on Risks, Rewards and Readiness. I was able to bring two suppliers from industry as my guests who work in AI and Web3 start-ups. We had a very fruitful discussion about good lines of communication between policy making and technology development.

I'm looking forward to the forthcoming year as we continue to work on Sector Led Improvement and Innovation with the prospect of a new government setting out fresh priorities in the near future.

Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board LINZ



Councillor Loic Rich, Deputy Chair

Cornwall Council

The new LINZ board has evolved out of the former Environment, Economy, Housing, and Transport Board. The Net Zero element enables much wider scrutiny and policy discussion on why, how, and who in local government can act on climate change, while the LINZ board retains many of the other areas covered by the former EEHT board, including housing, transport, water quality, and waste and recycling.

I am grateful to fellow board member Cllr Diana Moore for her support and determination to steer the LGA in a more ecological and climate conscious direction, as well as our substitute members who have regularly attended and participated in LINZ board meetings.

Climate change and environment

The LINZ board is seeking to 'empower and resource local government to accelerate local climate action, maximising their potential to reduce carbon emissions through citizen engagement, international practice, retrofit and green energy efficiency, looking at the idea of a 'just' transition, and local climate action such promoting key messages and collaboration between local and national government.

There is also lots of work being done on biodiversity net gain and nature recovery, alongside air quality and land quality. I've added a separate section on water quality here:

Water quality

With water quality being a main focus under the Climate Change and Environment work of the LINZ board, it was great to be able to chair the Public Policy Exchange event Improving Water Quality in the UK and be able to put across the LGA's perspective on this topical issue as well as here from experts and fellow politicians on the environmental state of our rivers and waterways, across three hours of discussion, presentations, and ideas for solutions.

The LGA perspective on this takes a particular stance on planning, looking at enabling councils to better consider issues around nutrient quality, biodiversity net gain, and local nature recovery strategies.

I also very recently presented on behalf of the LGA to the National Infrastructure Commission in relation to local authority approaches, challenges, and opportunities for partnership working on dealing with surface water flooding. Again, the issue of water quality was brought up with regard to impacts on sewage overflows into our rivers and seas.

Housing

One of the persistent issues with housing, and factors surrounding the housing crisis – that is the lack of decent affordable housing, as well as new housing in general – seems to be developers getting planning permission but taking too long to get round to building the homes which are greatly needed, aside from general issues with supply of both social and private rented sector housing. The scarcity of private rented sector housing, combined with a lack of social housing, has resulted often in hundreds of families in many local authority areas presenting as homeless and being put into temporary accommodation. These are often B and Bs or budget hotels. LGA research on this is extensive and it's great to be able to address this national housing crisis with some excellent reports and data from their officers.

The LINZ board is looking at a six-point plan to deliver more homes, including Local Authorities getting good borrowing rates from the Public Works Loan Board, more support for councils in the area of building safety, and a focus on having a plan-led system that is properly resourced to enable councils to support their net zero carbon ambitions as part of the planning reforms.

Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) / littering / plastic pollution

It is frustrating to see the DRS delayed even further now possibly to 2028. Other countries have been doing this for many years!!! It would have a massive positive impact on litter overnight.

Other waste and recycling work has around tackling fly-tipping and POPs (Persistent Organic Pollutants) which can be found in furniture. A lot of this has been in relation to consultations on national legislation drafts.

Transport

With the fall out on HS2 bringing other opportunities to other areas, I have been especially interested in new rail projects and rail policy, especially on how to accelerate the increase of freight moving from road to rail.

There's been some interesting legislation on accessible streets and footways that we have been consulted on and the LGA responses have been well informed and considered, including in relation to issues such as obstructions on the highway, for example with regard to pedestrians with visual impairment and mobility issues.

Active Travel is another area I am interested in, especially being quite involved in my own council area on this, in terms of creating better environments – especially in small towns and cities – for people to walk, wheel, and cycle.

We've also covered work on electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure in rural areas, buses, and highways maintenance.

Think Tank discussions

I hope to be able to organise some Think Tank discussion via the new online portal for our Independent Group.

It has been a busy year on this board, especially with lots of online debates and webinars. I look forward to disseminating more of the LINZ board work and going into more details with colleagues through our LINZ Think Tank and at our Group events.

People and Places Board



Councillor Emily O'Brien, Deputy Chair

Lewes District Council

The People and Places Board represents the interest of town, rural and coastal areas ('non-metropolitan' areas) around topics such as jobs, skills and the often troublesome and fragmented series of different growth funding streams (such as Levelling Up, Shared Prosperity fund etc). The Board also covers issue around devolution, rural economies (including our food economies) and digital connectivity. The remit was recently broadened and now includes strategic transport and housing.

It has been a busy year! As well as regular Board meetings and separate Lead Member meetings, I've continued to represent this Board and our sister board (City Regions) in ministerial working groups looking at the Green Skills and Nature Skills needed for the future, joined the LGA's Cost of Living Advisory Board and chaired two well attended cost-of-living webinars, and given evidence for the LGA to an Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee evidence session on flooding. I also attended the Independent Group Conference which gave some really helpful steers around devolution.

Just a few highlights from this year's People and Board cycle include:

- Some excellent discussion on 'Work Local' which the LGA's important ask on defragmenting skills funding and devolving skills responsibility to local areas.
- On a recent 'Work Local' paper we successfully pushed for changes to language/ and focus ('Plan for Prosperity' not 'Plan for Growth') including more emphasis on local authority leadership roles in shaping employment and skills, not just providing in response to businesses need but helping to shape these needs.
- Also, as part of our Independent Group contribution, we have repeatedly stressed the need to for the LGA to emphasise the need for devolving such powers to all councils – not just those councils with devolution deals.
- We made a similar point around Strategic Transport when this came for discussion. We have also supported inclusion of research piece on the board's work programme showing how access to transport is key to economic inclusion,

which those of us in rural and non-metropolitan areas are deeply aware of. The Independent Group has also requested further research next into demand responsive transport.

- The Board also recently started looking at AI, and we made points about importance of councils retaining ownership of the tools as we start to make greater use of AI to deliver our services (aka concerns about outsourcing the tech), on the very high energy use of AI (carbon impact) and we emphasised the need for sharing good practice.
- We have been active on influencing the Board's work programme. Another of our suggested research areas is now being looked at: taking a focussed look at homelessness in non-metropolitan areas, due to costs for emergency and temporary accommodation escalating, and rural homelessness also becoming a thing in a way it never has been. Some of our non-metropolitan areas are less geared toward tackling homelessness so the very large increases are causing unsustainable financial burdens.
- We've championed having a broader focus on the Board, and welcomed the Rural Services Network, and Leading-Edge representatives to the board, emphasising the need to align agendas with other organisations where we can, rather than lobby separately

Thanks to our Board representatives (Myself, Kevin and Julian) and our able subs (Carolyne and Caroline). And thanks too to everyone who has contributed via the People and Places Think Tank, which has just moved to an on-line platform– please do join it! This is in place of an email discussion list which had become quite cumbersome as our membership had grown. We've really valued the comments and discussion, and they've helped guide our contributions to Board meetings, so please keep them coming.

Safer and Stronger Communities Board



Councillor Clive Woodbridge, Deputy Chair Epsom and Ewell Council

As always, the Safer and Strong Communities Board has covered a wide range of topics, and the Independent Group representatives on the Board, and substitutes, have made a positive and constructive contribution over the past year.

Amongst the issues the Board has been working on include: tackling serious and organised crime through the new Clear, Hold, Build approach; ongoing work around domestic abuse and input to the National Expert Steering Group on the Domestic Abuse Act, including looking at councils' implementation of new duties regarding the provision of emergency accommodation; input to the Home Office's review of Community Safety Partnerships; the increasingly urgent requirement to address local authorities' regulatory workforce issues, with shortages in some areas impacting delivery; and the implications of the proposed Martyn's Law on venue anti-terrorism protection for local authorities and their communities.

In recent months the community cohesion impact of the Israel-Gaza conflict has come into sharp focus. Through the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE) the Board has been well placed to support councils and council officers manage what has probably been one of the most divisive community cohesion issues in recent years. In particular, SIGCE has this year provided a forum for council officers to share good practice and experiences.

Although not usually a significant area of work, the Board has provided input to the Law Commission's project to look at burial and cremation law and how that should be updated. The issues with Legacy Independent Funeral Directors in Hull has recently led to a request from DLUHC for councils to go out and inspect their local funeral directors. Given the lack of resources and a regulatory environment for funeral directors, the Board is considering what a future regulatory regime might look like ahead of the expected Ministry of Justice call for evidence this summer, and what role, if any, there should be for local councils.

XL Bully dogs were added to the list of banned dogs under the Dangerous Dog Act at the end of December 2023. The Board has been working closely with Defra about the details of the ban and this has included working on the level of, and means of distributing new burdens funding to councils. The division of responsibility between the police and councils for typing dogs - deciding whether a dog belongs to a banned breed – has also been a topic of discussion, as has the scarcity of suitable kennel spaces locally.

An interesting piece of work has been a refresh of Board policies on reducing reoffending. Having not considered the LGA's policy positions around reducing reoffending for a number of years the Board agreed it was time to review and where appropriate update the Board's policy position. Having started the process in September, the Board approved a comprehensive set of policies at its meeting in March, which is already informing the Board's work with those external bodies that have an interest in reducing reoffending.

Congress of the Council of Europe



Councillor Linda Gillham, Regional Member

Runnymede Council

This year has seen a return to monitoring of elections and there have also been teams travelling to observe the application of the

Charter of Local Self-Government. Both activities monitor the situation of local and regional democracy in the 46 member states.

The Ukrainian Delegation have continued to attend all Congress meetings and bring us insight into the endeavours and difficulties they are facing.

Youth delegates from each country also attend the Congress Plenaries and make very valuable contributions. Their abilities to converse in many languages and work together as a group of individuals across Europe is certainly to be admired.

The Plenary session in October 2023 provided a valuable and very interesting opportunity. The UK delegation was given a tour of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which is based in Strasbourg. We were able to ask questions and observe the court rooms where cases are heard. It was interesting to note that the UK continues to have some of the lowest number of appeals compared to other countries.

Personally, I was pleased to be made rapporteur on an opinion on fostering the Circular Economy in cities and regions and will be presenting this at the Governance Committee in June 24 and full Plenary later in the year.

I believe the Congress President's comment below is appropriate at this time.

Congress President Marc Cools has made the following statement:

“Thirty years ago this week, the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers adopted a statutory resolution establishing the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities as a permanent assembly of cities and regions in Europe. From 31 May to 3 June 1994, the Congress held its first session. Today, 30 years on, the Congress has an even stronger mandate from the Reykjavik Summit to advance local and regional democracy, ensure respect of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, strengthen human rights protection and uphold the rule of law at grassroot level.”

Council of European Municipalities and Regions



Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council

The Council of European Municipalities and Region (CEMR), through its member LGAs, represents over 100,000 councils across all 46 countries of Europe. Like the UK, almost half of European countries are not in the EU, so for us this is an important resource and meeting place. CEMR was established over 70 years ago and is based in Brussels.

In the same way that councils work together in the LGA, so the national LGAs work together across UK in the UK Forum, and across Europe in the CEMR. We share good practice, exchange experience and new initiatives, and develop new partnerships and networks for the benefit of our councils and communities and seek to influence the wider policy agenda.

The LGA signed off the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenge recommendations which included increased learning from our international partners. I was able to engage with many of our European and International colleagues this year, elected by CEMR as their spokesperson on Climate and Energy, and serving member of CEMR's Expert Group on Climate and Energy.

In June, the Policy Committee meeting with 40+ countries represented, was in Tbilisi, Georgia, very close to the border with Russia. We met local government counterparts and MPs who talked about the influence of the border. We discussed Ukraine and met inspiring people working with the huge numbers of refugees. We discussed safety, gender equality and the future of local government in Europe.

In support of protecting and improving our environment, I was honoured to be invited to represent CEMR at the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP 28 in Dubai. I represented you and over 100,000 councils across 46 countries of Europe and one million elected representatives in Europe. I was asked to speak on what councils are doing to tackle climate change (highlighting the Local Government Association climate change hub), how councils finance tackling the climate crisis and on how climate change impacts mental health. In addition, I prepared and contributed on 'Net

Zero Cities’ and ‘Decarbonization of transport’. I also hosted a roundtable of World Local Government Leaders, working to ensure the importance of Local Government in implementation was properly recognised, making things happen in our communities. For the first time, we had a formal session specifically for local government to put forward our amendments and launch CHAMP, an agreement signed by 71 countries to help local governments in the planning, financing, implementation, and monitoring of climate strategies. Action is needed at every level, such as increasing the insulation of our homes and putting solar panels on roofs where we can.

Without returning home, I went straight on to the CEMR Policy Committee hosted by the City Council of Prague, just before Christmas. We saw at first hand much of the “greening” of the city centre environment and protection of their heritage, enhancing the economy at the same time. I took to the conference floor to present our work at COP28 and our councils’ work on mitigation and tackling climate change. Other countries also gave accounts, faced with significant challenges where the country’s wealth still depends on mining and industries that are all heavy on carbon emissions. There is much to do and it needs all of us to reduce our energy requirements with efficiency measures and to use renewable energy, preferably not on farmland, in scale and close to source!



Councillor Marianne Overton at CEMR Meeting with other representatives

County Councils Network (CCN)



Julian German, Vice Chair and Rural Spokesperson at the County Councils Network (CCN)

Cornwall Council

CCN is a cross-party special interest group of the Local Government Association. In total, the 37 county and unitary authorities that make up the CCN are England's largest grouping of councils, with their 2,600 councillors representing some 26 million people, and covering 86 per cent of the country's landmass.

Collectively, we are responsible for 38 per cent of England's GVA, almost half the country's entire spend on children's and adult social care, and maintain 70 per cent of local roads.

CCN creates and commissions reports on its members priority areas. These are then used to lobby, often into central government. This year our key piece of work has been the Manifesto for Councils used to lobby the new government during it's policy formation. You can find more about this online at [CCN](#): alongside other reports from this year, including housing, children's and adults social care and SEND school transport.

You can follow CCN on X @CCNOffice LinkedIn and Facebook

CCN hold council meetings which involves all those from the LGA Independent Group who are appointed either by their authority or through political proportionality top ups. Council meetings provide an opportunity to hear on particular topics facing County and large Unitary Councils. Always of good value is reporting from the Society of County Treasurers to keep us abreast of the key financial matters. Myself and Cllr David Hitchiner also serve on the Executive of CCN.

Thank you to the Independent Group for the opportunity to serve on CCN as Vice Chair for the Independent Group.

District Councils Network (DCN)



Councillor Jason Zadrozny, Vice Chair

Ashfield Council

Cllr Zadrozny has been the LGA Independent Group Vice-Chair on the District Councils Network (DCN) for the past four years and has now completed his term in this position. The LGA Independent Group would like to thank Cllr Zadrozny for his work representing the Group during this time. A new Vice-Chair of the DCN representing the LGA Independent Group will be appointed in July.

The DCN held its annual conference once again in St Albans and there was a very strong representation from Independent and Green leaders of District Councils from across the country. Our political group session focused on issues around the current approach to Devolution, which cuts out our District Councils and has caused our members great concern.

The DCN has four strategic priorities for their lobbying and research. These are Environment, Net Zero and Sustainability, Finance and Investment, Regeneration and Growth and Health, Housing and Hardship – for which our Independent Group representative Cllr Hannah Dalton is the spokesperson.

Cllr Hannah Dalton chaired a roundtable meeting with the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee in her capacity as DCN spokesperson to discuss housing adaptations and other services which support disabled people's housing needs. There was a particular focus on the Disabled Facilities Grant, planning and building regulations and social housing and the private rented sector. This was referenced in the seventh report of the Committee.

With the continuing success of Independent Group members in local elections, the proportional representation of our members on DCN has once again grown to five full places on the Executive including our new Vice-Chair. Thank you to all our current Executive members, Cllr Hannah Dalton (Epsom and Ewell), Cllr Andy Mellen (Mid Suffolk) and Cllr Paul Harvey (Basingstoke).

Written by Abigail Gallop, Head of the Independent Group.

Local Government Pensions Committee (LGPC)



Councillor Doug McMurdo

Bedford Council

The LGPC is a committee that considers business appertaining to the Employer side of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS), of which there are 86 funds in England and Wales, 11 in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. The LGPS in England and Wales (LGPS) is one of the world's largest funded pension schemes and a key player in global markets, investing around £364 billion (excluding Environment Agency funds) worldwide.

Whilst there is a considerable amount of work spent in matters relating to regulations, more generally, the most significant impact for Administering Authorities (Pension Funds) is that around the "McCloud remedy". The task set is that all member records have to be scrutinised, to check if the employee is protected, and the results of this work to be included in the Annual Benefit Statement, by 31 August 2025. This is creating a huge amount of work for Pension Funds. To assist, DLUHC published draft guidance on 1 March 2024 which covers:

- case prioritisation
- how to identify members in scope of protection
- how to deal with complexities of past transfers
- governance and data collection
- qualifying scenarios.

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill (boycotts, divestment and sanctions bill) was a matter throughout the year, the Committee followed, and the timeline can be seen online.

Consultation on ‘pooling’

This [consultation](#) took place in July 2023; go to for more details. The [Government’s response](#) was published in November 2023.

It is clear that the Government wishes to see greater pace in respect of Pension Funds deploying assets through their respective ‘pool companies’. The Mansion House Speech was a key moment in the calendar for the LGPS. The Chancellor set out three key areas for attention:

- consolidation of LGPS assets, with a March 2025 deadline for all LGPS funds to transfer their assets into local government pension pools.
- each asset pool should exceed £50 billion of assets.
- double asset allocations in private equity to 10 per cent.

Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)

DLUHC consulted on proposals for new requirements on LGPS administering authorities in July 2023. The [consultation](#) largely sets out the ambition the Government presents to Administering Authorities (pension funds).

Climate Risk Reporting

Presently, private sector pension schemes are required to record and publish Taskforce on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), by regulation.

Sharia compliance and the LGPS

The Scheme Advisory Board (SAB) commissioned a report to check if membership of the LGPS is Sharia compliant. The report concluded that it is because members’ benefits are guaranteed, they are not determined by investment performance.

In conclusion, a considerable amount of time and effort is spent on important issues the Administering Authorities face. My thanks go to the Pensions Team at the LGA, keeping pace with all the consultations and regulatory changes. There is a considerable amount of material relating to the LGPS, and I urge you to look at [the website](#) to find out more information.

Local Partnerships Board



Councillor Julian German, Member

Cornwall Council

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

Local Partnerships share our intellectual capital freely for the benefit of the whole public sector and issue regular guidance and dissemination of best practice. There are a wide range of resources designed for use by the local government sector freely available in the Resource Hub section of their [website](#). Examples include the CEO Blueprint, the Greenhouse Gas Accounting Tool, Local Authority Company Review Guidance the Temporary Accommodation Toolkit

Local Partnerships is very active on social media and I encourage you to follow them on X: @LP_localgov and on LinkedIn: @LocalPartnershipsLLP

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

Local Partnerships delivers value and efficacy for the public purse. As a key interface between local and central government, we provide expert advice and practical resources alongside project and programme delivery support, enabling public services to thrive.

Whether supporting and accelerating the delivery of major infrastructure, tackling climate challenges through waste efficiency and renewable energy propositions through to wider place-making initiatives, we help transform services across the public sector ecosystem.

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

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

Commercial Property Boards



Councillor Wisdom Da Costa BSc,
FCCA, AMCT, QTS

Windsor and Maidenhead

The Local Government Association (LGA) plays a key role in the healthy functioning of English and Welsh local authorities through its advocacy work to government on behalf of 315 district, county, metropolitan and unitary member authorities; through influencing the political agenda for members and; providing leadership and solutions to national problems.

To help ensure that the LGA fulfils its mandate to high levels of excellence, the LGA aims to develop and maintain funding streams that are aligned with its objectives over and above the 16 per cent from subscriptions from member authorities and 63 per cent from Government grants.

This is where the Commercial Advisory Board fits in to back up the LGA Board of the LGA to “oversee and support the development of the LGA’s commercial strategy” and actions including, leading and acting “as ambassadors for the cultural change necessary for a more commercially focused LGA.”

The Commercial Advisory Board (CAB) comprises four politicians one from each of the political groups (Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Independent Group) and is currently chaired by the Labour member.

The responsibilities for the CAB also include the “oversight of its two properties at 18 Smith Square and Layden House” (which were formerly under remit of separate property boards).

Furthermore, as part of the LGA’s commercial activities, it now has a stake in a number of aligned commercial ventures providing market leading solutions including, inter alia, GeoSpace, Local Partnerships and the UK Municipal Bonds Agency, with other exciting opportunities being developed. These ventures generate much needed extra income to support the LGA’s activities and objectives.

Over the past year, the Commercial Advisory Board has overseen the development of the LGA's Income Generation Strategy. The Strategy takes a holistic approach to the LGA's sources of income with an overarching purpose "To maximise our capacity to support councils by extending our ability to offer valued services and enhancing the LGA's financial sustainability". The Board has supported and overseen the implementation of Strategy's short-term action plan. Some of the activities of the plan included:

- Conducting business development reviews with teams from across the organisation.
- Making interim arrangements to expand the capacity for bidding in competitive tenders.
- Taking a unified approach to marketing and communication.
- Reviewing the organisational policies and processes.

The next step for the Board is to support the transition to a long-term Income Generation Strategy. This includes defining the LGA's ambition of maximising its income in the medium and long term and developing a plan for income generation activities to fulfil this ambition. The Board works with excellent LGA officers to:

- Develop options for a sustainable funding model for the LGA.
- Consider future opportunities that would contribute to maximising capacity to support councils and extending our offer.
- Shape the organisational approach to income generation activities.

My personal ambition for the Commercial Advisory Board is for it to help the LGA become thought and practice leaders, helping it to provide solutions for local authorities who are facing ever increasing demands to achieve more with less.

We live in exciting times and the members of the Commercial Advisory Board are thrilled to be able to help our members to thread the needle and go from strength to strength in an every more complicated world.

Independent Group Office



Abigail Gallop, Head of the Independent Group

Local Government Association (LGA)

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My highlights this year have been our Group White Paper weekender, getting into what we as the Independent Group are asking of a new Government, our first two-day annual conference and working with such a committed Next Generation cohort. It was fantastic to be with you on the programme's leadership journey and to see how you brought all the learning from the three weekends to a fantastic final debate. The brilliant set of local elections results was of course also a highlight of the year!

This forthcoming year I really want us to excel in the support we give our ever-increasing group membership and our Council Leaders. Independents and Greens are picking up the pieces in a number of councils and we are here to help. I'm keen to bring more of you onboard as Member Peers, so we can share your experience and learning across our councils and with our members.



Rodrigo Sanchez, Political Officer to the Independent Group

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It has been another busy year for the Independent Group, however, it was a pleasure attending and supporting members at our Annual Conference in In Central Bedfordshire, the Peer Conference in Bristol and the Next Generation 23/24 cohort in Warwick. A particular highlight for me was inviting Kate Cheney MP from the Teal Independents in Australia to talk to us, via zoom, at our Annual Conference. I have enjoyed also supporting and building up our network of member peers alongside Councillor Adam Paynter as well as working alongside Abigail in the Group Office to deliver for our members. Looking ahead, I am excited to be delivering the 2024-25 LGA 'Be a Councillor' flagship programme aimed at attracting individuals to stand for public office.



Noleen Rosen, Political Assistant to the Independent Group

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I have spent an enjoyable 14 months in the LGA Legal Team working on very large and important projects. Quick pace and hard work but I have gained lots of knowledge working with legal teams within councils facing many similar issues. The COVID Inquiry being one of the big, interesting projects which the LGA and WLGA Chief Executives gave evidence. I am now back in the Group where I have seen massive changes in our group size and am meeting many new councillors.





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