

The Independent Group

Annual Report 2024/25



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Group Leader's year in review



Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

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

Huge congratulations to all our members standing up for our communities and succeeding in the local elections. Looking back on the year, I am filled with enormous pride in all our members and all that we have achieved together this past year. Despite national politics in turmoil, we have continued to grow in number and influence right across the country, changing things for the better in our communities, our councils and our country. With a growing team of 3,370 members, 19.5 per cent of all councillors in England and Wales (now without Reform UK), we are keeping our three excellent office staff very busy indeed!

As an Independent Group of councillors who care and think about issues, we have shown ourselves to be effective. By holding timely webinars and conferences on hot topics, we have drawn on the strengths of our group members, shaped LGA policy and thus their work with the media and with the Government. Working at all levels, we have changed or driven LGA policy in areas such as Local Government Reorganisation, Civility, Solar on Roofs, and we have together changed the Government stance on some issues. The task of representing you as members to bring the funding and legislation we need is as exciting now as ever. Thank you for your encouragement and support that makes so much possible.

Standing for MPs July 2024

With the vain hope a short uplift in the economy would save the party, the Conservative Prime Minister finally called the long-awaited General Election. A record number of Independent (459), Green (629) and Plaid Cymru (32) candidates stood for MP. Each did an important job, listening to residents and sharing strong values, that help to keep our communities resilient. Fifty-seven Independents kept their deposits, including Councillor Georgina Hill. Group Treasurer Councillor Andrew Cooper, (Green) came second in the Huddersfield constituency with 10,568 votes, beating the Conservatives. Congratulations go towards our Independent Members of Parliament: Shockat Adam, Jeremy Corbyn, Alex Easton, Adnan Hussain, Ayoub Khan and Iqbal Mohamed. The Green Party returned four members of parliament: Sian Berry, Ellie Chowns, Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay. Lastly, Plaid Cymru celebrated equal success with four of their members getting elected to Parliament: Ann Davies, Ben Lake, Llinos Medi and Liz Saville Roberts. I have enjoyed working with them and look forward to ongoing cooperation with our Group into the future.

Tackling the new Government

The Labour Government, the first since 2010, swept in with such a big majority that they felt they could do what the Conservatives had not. They continued unpopular Conservative policies with vigour. This includes ‘bold announcements’ such as the re-introduction of unattainable housing targets for local authorities requiring 1.5 million more homes to be built in five years, 50 per cent more than we failed to build before, outdating our local plans and creating a developer’s dream “free for all”. Even the Deputy Prime Minister threatened to quit over the issue, but all to no avail.

The Government took the view they would work closely with the LGA and set up a Leaders’ Council of a dozen members chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, and supported by the Minister of State, Jim McMahon and Baroness Taylor, both previous LGA Board members and colleagues of mine. Regular meetings have been useful and I was pleased that my departure from the agreed script on the first day was welcomed, changing the approach for meetings that followed. I was also able to have one to one with ministers and attend joint committees on asylum seekers, Net Zero and Special Needs education.

Then came the controversial white paper with dramatic plans to dissolve many councils and create just a few. Each vast region has an elected mayor as spokesperson and negotiator with Government, leaving council leaders to do the operational management of services, but with less funding.

The Independent Group has long called for a 'devolution of power and money' to our local authorities as they are. This plan does the opposite, centralising power from many representative councillors to the Mayor, a risk in itself. Councillors will disappear with those left expected to represent a larger catchment area, breaking vital democratic connections with the community, especially for Independent Group members. This battle has already been hugely draining on council resources and the changes are unfunded, points I made directly to the Ministers.

Another Conservative policy going headlong under Labour is the takeover by the global solar industry of many thousands of acres of British farmland. Glass, steel and concrete cover areas the size of cities, sprawling over miles, setting our villages in an industrial landscape. The risk to land and water quality and noxious gases from the battery storage units is dangerous and unnecessary. Meanwhile vast areas of commercial roofs lie vacant and we all pay extra high energy costs in everything we buy, draining funds out of the country for the rest of our lifetimes. This work continues.

Supporting party and Independent conferences

District Councils network

In March, more leading District councillors than ever before, 1200, created another excellent two-day District Councils Network (DCN) conference at the De Vere Beaumont Estate in Old Windsor. Keynote speakers, Jim McMahon MP and Baroness Sharon Taylor did front up on the Local Government Reorganisation, taking comments and questions, despite the understandable antipathy from many District councillors. They are relying on theoretical "improved efficiencies", which have not materialised to date.

Green Party

In September, it was a pleasure to be supporting our Green Party Colleagues at the Green Party Autumn Conference Manchester. The Independent Group hosted an evening reception, kindly supported and sponsored by the LGA and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). Speakers included Baroness Natalie Bennett, Carla Denyer MP, Justin Griggs and me. It was an opportunity to celebrate recent Green Party successes in the General Election. We hosted a panel debate entitled; 'Building Success: How the New UK Government Can Meet Housing Targets While Addressing the Climate and Nature Crises. Will the new UK government's housing targets and planning proposals help or hinder?' As Chair, I am most grateful to my Deputy Caroline Jackson, Councillors Diana Moore and Emily O'Brien and Baroness Natalie Bennett for brilliant contributions. Housing needs to be built to match local needs, rather than a commodity for global giants. With 1.29 million households on council waiting lists, and more households than ever in temporary accommodation, it is essential to address current housing demands while also planning for inclusive growth and tackling the climate crisis. Councils have some impact over 80 per cent of an areas' emissions, and considerable direct impact, given their central role in providing housing and other local infrastructure.

Plaid Cymru

In October, at the Plaid Cymru Autumn Conference in Cardiff, I hosted an executive roundtable discussion on 'Civility in Public Life – protecting and supporting local politicians and councillors'. We were joined by Councillors Beca Brown, Caryl Roberts, Christopher Franks as well as Peredur Owen Griffiths MS and former Plaid Leader Adam Price MS. I chair the cross-party steering group at the LGA. We did an online survey in August 2024. Three quarters of respondents (73 per cent) reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the past 12 months and only 23 per cent of those reported it to the police. Only half, 57 per cent, said their authority's arrangements for protecting councillors were at least fairly effective.

We have pushed the police to make a named officer available to councillors under the 'Defending Democracy Policing Protocol', to allow councillors to keep their private address private and for police and councils to take a more consistent approach across the country. We also created training and a wealth of resources for you.

LGA Annual Conference

Also, in October, the LGA held its delayed annual conference in Harrogate. We had a fantastic turnout, starting with our Special General Meeting. Changes to the Group Constitution went through unanimously, but the motion to change the name of the Group did not, in the time available. Thank you to all speakers for your valuable and insightful contributions!

Councillor Craig Browne (Cheshire East) delivered our plenary session on all the fantastic work he has been doing as Chief Executive of Citizens Advice in North Staffordshire. Citizens Advice is a lifeline to many people for benefits, work, debt and money as well as housing, family, immigration and consumer advice. Councillors work daily on the same issues, and many councils are in partnership, giving hope in seemingly impossible situations.

The Independent Group also hosted three popular political group sessions on affordable housing, devolution and whether we need to create a statutory duty for local authorities on climate change. On affordable housing, it was clear that a 'whole system approach' is needed which includes reform of the planning system, unused land and empty housing as well as creating the necessary skills and apprenticeships to meet increasing demand. On devolution, members were united in their opposition to a 'one size fits all' approach. Finally, Councillor Wisdom da Costa drew much support in his calls for councils to make climate change a statutory duty as part of local authority decision making. This follows an Environmental Targets (Public Authorities) Bill¹ sponsored by Lord Krebs who writes in the Local Government Chronicle² about placing a statutory duty on public bodies to deliver climate targets.

1 bills.parliament.uk/bills/3749#:~:text=A%20Bill%20to%20make%20provision,functions%3B%20and%20for%20connected%20purposes.

2 lgcplus.com/services/environment/lord-krebs-why-councils-need-a-duty-to-deliver-climate-targets-18-10-2024/

Independent Group Conference

In January, because of the snap General Election, we held our postponed Independent Group Conference which took place at Moor Hall Conference Centre in Cookham, Maidenhead. In total, we had 94 delegates attend our Friday night Group Dinner and 108 attend our conference on Saturday. We had a full day of conference discussions and debates with the main highlight being 'Devolution, local government reorganisation and public sector reform', and we welcomed Sonika Sidhu, LGA Assistant Director of Policy, as well as the ever-popular Professor Colin Copus to give their powerful perspectives on the white paper and its potential impact on our group and its elected representatives, especially for District councillors. In addition, we also had the usual breakout sessions covering a range of hot topics in local government, particularly the new standards regime for councillors, as well as networking sessions involving our regional lead peers getting the latest from members within their patch. Unfortunately, our Head of Group Office Abigail, was ill, leaving Noleen and Rodrigo to rise to the occasion and manage the event superbly! My thanks to both for their professionalism throughout!

Helping to shape national policy

The LGA hosted another fantastic annual parliament reception at the start of the year, celebrating the success of the membership organisation through its work in parliament as well as the hard work being delivered on the ground by all of our council leaders and local councillors. Jim McMahon MP, Minister for Local Government, delivered the keynote speech on local government re-organisation. Speaking to him, I re-iterated our group stance as part of the wider cross-party position of the LGA, saying 'yes' to devolution of more powers and monies to our councils but 'no' to merging and re-organisation of local authorities. To tackle this ongoing threat to local democracy and strengthen my ability to tackle Government in our regular meetings, I now hold weekly meetings with Independent and Green Party Leaders to stay connected with the facts on the ground, ready to help shape the LGA response and tackle Government. I am most grateful to my Deputy, Councillor Caroline Jackson, who steered our 'local government reorganisation campaign', which promoted a new initiative of the campaign against re-organisation from signing a petition to save district councils, writing to your local MP as well as raise awareness in local media outlets.

Local elections – BBC broadcasting guidelines

Just before the 2025 Local Elections, the Independent Executive met up with Ric Bailey, who is the policy advisor for the BBC and formally submitted suggestions for changes to the BBC broadcasting guidelines ahead of the local elections. I am very happy to confirm that the majority were accepted. Our key point was that our members are a considerable force in local government and deserve proper recognition in the media. This point was accepted. Six of our eight points resulted in a change to national guidance!

Debate not Hate campaign/Civility in Public Life Steering Group

I chair the cross-party Civility in Public Life Steering Group, and speak on behalf of the LGA. Here are a few key points from our annual report. Achievements and priorities of the Steering Group which focus on protecting and supporting councillors facing abuse and intimidation:

- **Engagement with Stakeholders:** Following the July general election, I pressed ministers to address threats against councillors. The Government committed to reforms, such as removing the requirement for councillors to publicly disclose home addresses.
- **Debate Not Hate Campaign:** We gathered survey data on councillors' experiences, influenced policing support, and secured commitments for legislative changes. Media interest was strong. The survey results and an interview with Councillor Marianne Overton were featured in a Sky News exclusive.
- **Councillor Standards Consultation:** We undertook a comprehensive sector-wide consultation that led to recommendations for strengthening councillor standards. I represented the LGA on the Government Advisory Group reviewing legislative proposals.
- **Online and Digital Safety:** We, at the LGA, worked with Ofcom to improve protections against online harassment and misinformation targeting councillors.
- **Workshops and Support:** National and bespoke workshops were conducted, reaching hundreds of councillors with training on personal safety and online harassment management. We have secured the grant and consultants to continue this work in 2025/6.
- **Future Priorities (2025/26):** We will focus on influencing new legislation, improving policing responses, tackling misinformation, and promoting democratic literacy. Currently, the Council is not responsible for correcting misinformation during a campaign. False information against a person is slander, but false information about their politics is not.

The LGA has launched its third annual Debate Not Hate Survey looking to gather information about councillors' experiences of abuse and intimidation during the last year, including the most recent local elections.

COP 29, Baku – Azerbaijan

This year I had the chance to visit Baku in Azerbaijan, representing you and all 130,000 councils in 41 countries across the whole of Europe as part of the Congress of European Municipalities and the Regions (CEMR). People representing organisations from all over the world gathered at COP 29 to encourage, inform and inspire action to do more to tackle climate change and mitigate the impacts. To the CEMR plenary, I contributed on 'Climate finance' and then on the significance of the work of local government.

Wider afield, I spoke on ‘greening’ our local transport, and how we can provide the tools that enable our councils to do the job better. The cheapest energy remains the energy we do not use. Foremost is the need to use less of the earth’s resources with energy efficient buildings. This year, a bill of \$300 bn/year by 2035 was agreed. Equally significant, the agreement under this presidency does not refer directly to a phase out of fossil fuels but simply reaffirms the call on nations to give up coal, oil and gas. Clearly, still a long way to go if we are to achieve net zero by 2030!

Next Generation Class of 24/25

Another year, another graduating cohort! This year we welcomed 14 ambitious councillors, comprising Independent and Green members, working together to become tomorrow’s ‘Next Generation’ of local leaders. Over a series of three weekends at Warwick Conferences, I witnessed a group of talented individuals grow in leadership skills and learn from each other about being more effective in the local communities we are all proud to serve. Confidence, skills and teamwork in debates were put to the test in a ‘mock council chamber’, getting the point across with civility and humour! At the same, participants focus on personal and political leadership, communication and media skills, which they can take back and use in their day-to-day council work. Thanks to all who took part in the course, making a fabulous network of colleagues. Thanks to our National Lead Peer, Councillor Adam Paynter, our Head of Group Office, Abigail Gallop, outside speakers as well as our LGA point of contact Michael Barrett, who put together such an important programme for those aspiring for leadership roles in the future. I look forward to following your fantastic journeys!

Awards

This year, we received a staggering 94 nominations for our Annual Clarence Barrett Award, although some were multiple nominations for the same person! There were some impressive success stories but what shone through all nominations was the dedication and community spirit shown by our members day-in-day-out, for the residents and communities they serve. Many congratulations go to our joint winners for this year: Councillor Hannah Dalton (Epsom and Ewell BC) and Councillor Kevin Etheridge OBE (Caerphilly County BC). Hannah is leader of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and has actively been involved with the LGA and DCN, serving as our representative on the latter. Hannah has also been heavily engaged with the local government white paper and took over from Councillor Linda Gillham as the regional lead peer for London and the Southwest. Kevin had dedicated over 40 years to local government and is a tireless campaigner for bowel cancer awareness. Congratulations also to our runners up, awarded with ‘commendations’: Councillors Johnny Denis (Lewis DC), Petrina Lees (Uttlesford DC), Natalie McVey (Malvern Hills DC), Mandy Ewings (West Devon BC). Finally, ‘citation awards’ were given in recognition to the following Councillors: Matt Edwards (Bradford MDC), Steve Stuart (Warwickshire BC), Paul Hayward (East Devon

DC) and Celia Hibbert (Wolverhampton City Council). Thank you everyone for your service and commitment, I am proud of you all!

2025 Local Elections

There was a huge loss of 674 Conservative councillors and 187 Labour councillors, mainly to the benefit of Reform UK and the Green councillors. On a personal note, I stood for county and for Mayor, in a team effort by Independents across Greater Lincolnshire. We all kept our county seats, with a good majority, 1,625 votes in my case. In the mayoral election over a huge area of ten councils, Independents came second or third in rural council areas, but fourth overall, with just under 20,000 votes, ahead of the Greens and Lib Dems. It was heartening to work right across the patch supporting each other, creating a very positive experience. What does this mean for our proportionality on the LGA? Out of 17,300 councillors in English and Welsh councils in LGA membership, of those around 3,370 are independent which is 19.3 per cent of all councillors throughout England and Wales.

Executive, Peers and Policy Boards

Once again, I have continued to be supported not just by my loyal and hardworking Deputy, Councillor Caroline Jackson, but an incredible executive team. You do a fantastic job, and it is a privilege and a joy to work with and represent you at the LGA. Similarly, my thanks go to our National Lead Peer, Councillor Adam Paynter, supported by six regional lead peers, including two greens and 34 accredited councillor peers. Their wealth of knowledge and expertise, put to good use in council peer challenges or peer mentoring request. I want to thank each one of you for your dedicated service and for being the 'eyes and ears' on the ground and delivering our sector-led improvement offer. You represent the professionalism and excellence of the Independent Group. Thank you to each one of our members and substitute members for the excellent work you do on the LGA policy boards. Together, you represent the best of Independent Group thinking, always putting the needs of residents first and what matters most for our communities, rather than adhering to party ideology.

Thank you

As many of you know, this will be my last Annual Report as leader since the Group constitution prevents me from standing again. I would therefore like to pay a special tribute to all our members, past and present, for being such kind, supportive, loyal and hardworking individuals and for giving me the privilege of serving you as your leader these past 14 years. It has been a great joy and honour.

Thanks to the Independent Group Office, past and present members of staff, as well as LGA staff both past and present. We are served well by such dedicated and professional officers who like us are committed to the best interests of our residents. Finally, I would like to thank my husband Peter Overton, for putting up with my many absences due to speaking engagements at various events and conferences, given the demands of the top job! Peter has been a stalwart supporter, keeping my feet on the ground and the ship sailing.

I offer my successor and the new team, my full support and encouragement going forward and will continue to help in whatever way I can, including through the Independent Network. Thank you once again for everything and I wish each one of you continued success in all that you do.



Councillor Marianne Overton MBE speaking to Minister of State Jim McMahon at the DCN Parliamentary Reception

Deputy Group Leader's Year in Review



Councillor Caroline Jackson

Lancaster City Council

Deputy Chair of the LGA and the Independent Group

Thank you for the privilege of my two-year term of office as Deputy Leader. You will rightly call me to account for what I did and didn't do. Firstly – my apologies for what I may not have achieved. Below I have detailed the key contributions I have made to the Independent group

With Marianne and EAB board members achieving a coherent, well informed and powerful voice for Independent group, in political circumstances that often presented the LGA as an unreceptive and non-inclusive organisation.

- Supporting Marianne at all times in the conduct of Independent Leaders' Meetings, LGA and Independent conference and deputising as necessary.
- Supporting to the best of my ability, Independent opposition to imposed local government re-organisation.
- Convening, conducting and concluding the Independent constitutional review.
- Serving on the LGA Devolution Task and Finish group meeting monthly and the Refugee and Asylum-Seeker task group also representing directors in the development of the LGA Medium Term Financial Strategy and in recruitment to senior officer positions.

It has been challenging, sometimes satisfying and a powerful learning experience throughout; Marianne has been a great example to me and I couldn't have done it without Abigail and her team so I offer them my heartfelt thanks.



The Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle with Councillors Overton MBE and Caroline Jackson



The Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle with Councillors Overton MBE and Caroline Jackson at the Green Party Conference

LGA Independent Group budget report



Councillor Andrew Cooper

Kirklees Council

Treasurer of the LGA Independent Group

Our total allocated budget for 2024/25 was £32,529. Our budget will be totally spent this year, predominantly on support and activities for members of the group

Thanks to staff in the Independent Group office for their work ensuring our budget is well managed and for the income they have helped draw in to support our events.

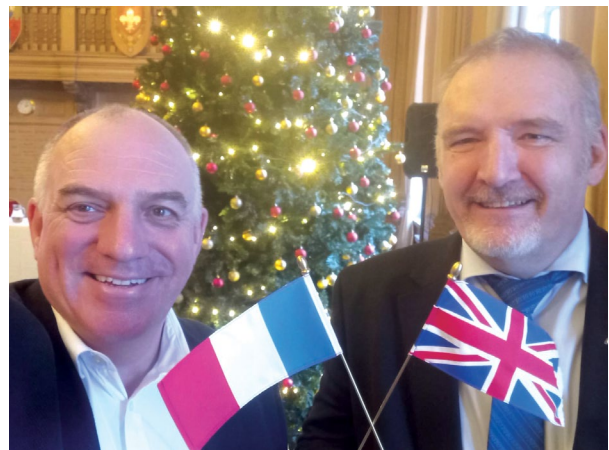
We have been successful at drawing money in to help support our budget and over £7k of external funding was drawn in to help fund our well attended Independent Group Conference. This is by far our biggest expenditure with a budget of £18,000

There was substantially more spend on the LGA Annual Conference than forecast. This is because the LGA allocates funding based on election results the year before, and the expectation is that the Group Office picks up any additional costs. This issue has been raised with the LGA Senior Leadership Team. In practice, although all delegates pay the same delegate rate, the dinner costs are ratioed based on expected turn out. If turn out is higher than the Events Team forecast, the Group Offices have to fund the additional turnout – hence we are penalised for success.

The Budget also supported Regional Events and events at Green Party and Plaid Cymru Conferences.

We spent £2k on research by Professor Colin Copus into Local Government Reorganisation which members found useful.

A budget of £36,801 has been allocated to the LGA Independent Group for 2025/26. Our Budget is based on numbers of members in our group and as it rises so does our budget. Good news!



LGA Independent Group

Board members

Children and Young People

Councillor Jon Hubbard (Deputy Chair)

Wiltshire Council

jon.hubbard@wiltshire.gov.uk

Councillor Anne Dorrian (Member)

Boston Borough Council

anne.dorrian@boston.gov.uk

Councillor Helen Wetherall (Sub)

North East Derbyshire Council

cllr.wetherall@ne-derbyshire.gov.uk

Councillor Ed Maxfield (Sub)

Norfolk Council

edward.maxfield.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk

Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte (Sub)

East Suffolk Council

rachel.smith-lyte@eastsuffolk.gov.uk

Culture Tourism and Sport Board

Councillor Julie Jones-Evans (Vice-Chair)

Isle of Wight Council

julie.jones-evans@iow.gov.uk

Councillor Ian Shipp (Sub)

West Suffolk Council

ian.shipp@westsuffolk.gov.uk

Councillor Rebecca Aldam (Sub)

Stroud District Council

cllr.rebecca.aldam@stroud.gov.uk

Community Wellbeing Board

Councillor Gillian Ford (Deputy Chair)

Havering London Borough Council
councillorgillian.ford@havering.gov.uk

Councillor Patricia Paterson-Vanegas (Member)

Wealden District Council
cllr.patricia.patterson-vanegas@wealden.gov.uk

Councillor Patrick Nicholson (Sub)

Plymouth City Council
patrick.nicholson@plymouth.gov.uk

Councillor Sally Howell (Sub)

Huntingdonshire District Council
sally.howell@huntingdonshire.gov.uk

Councillor Jake Lodge

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
cllrjakelodge@barnsley.gov.uk

Councillor Laura Manston

Sevenoaks District Council
cllr.manston@sevenoaks.gov.uk

City Regions

Councillor Martin Fodor (Deputy Chair)

Bristol City Council
Cllr.martin.fodor@bristol.gov.uk

Councillor Geraldine Coggins (Sub)

Trafford Council
geraldine.coggins@trafford.gov.uk

Councillor Matt Edwards (Sub)

Bradford City Council
matt.edwards@bradford.gov.uk

Environment and Resources Board

Councillor Ian Stephens (Deputy Chair)

Isle of Wight Council
ian.stephens@iow.gov.uk

Councillor James Hakewill (Member)

North Northamptonshire Council
jim.hakewill@northnorthants.gov.uk

Councillor John Ward (Sub)

Babergh District Council
john.ward@babergh.gov.uk

Councillor Wisdom Da Costa (Sub)

North Kesteven District Council
cllr.dacosta@rbwm.gov.uk

Fire Services Management Committee

Councillor Dr Wendy Maples (Chair)

East Sussex Council
cllr.wendy.maples@eastsussex.gov.uk

Councillor John Shuttleworth (Sub)

Durham County Council
jshuttleworth@durham.gov.uk

Councillor Nigel Smith

Conwy Borough Council
cllr.nigel.smith@conwy.gov.uk

Improvement and Innovation

Councillor Alex Coley (Deputy Chair)

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
acoley@epsom-ewell.gov.uk

Councillor Sarah Rouse (Member)

Malvern Hills District Council
sarahrouse72@gmail.com

Councillor Neil Gregory (Sub)

Uttlesford District Council
cllrgregory@uttlesford.gov.uk

Councillor Julian German (Sub)

Cornwall Council
cllr.julian.german@cornwall.gov.uk

Councillor Adam Paynter (Lead Peer – Observer)

Cornwall Council
cllr.adam.paynter@cornwall.gov.uk

Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board

Councillor Loic Rich (Deputy Chair)

Cornwall Council
cllr.loic.rich@cornwall.gov.uk

Councillor Diane Moor

Exeter City Council
cllr.diana.moore@exeter.gov.uk

Councillor Ed Gemmell (Sub)

Buckinghamshire Council
ed.gemmell@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

Councillor Paul Hilliard (Sub)

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole
paul.hilliard@bcpcouncil.gov.uk

Councillor Phil Jordan (Sub)

Isle of Wight Council
phil.jordan@iow.gov.uk

Councillor Caroline Topping (Sub)

Suffolk County Council
caroline.topping@suffolk.gov.uk

Councillor John Evans (Sub)

Uttlesford District Council
cllrevans@uttlesfod.gov.uk

Councillor Jonathan Essex (Sub)

Surrey County Council
jonathan.essex@surreycc.gov.uk

People and Places Board

Councillor Emily O'Brien (Deputy-Chair)

Lewes District Council
emily.obrien@lewes.gov.uk

Councillor Kevin Etheridge (Member)

Caerphilly County Borough Council
kevinetheridge@caerphilly.gov.uk

Councillor Julian Dean (Member)

Shropshire Council
julian.dean@shropshire.gov.uk

Councillor Mandy Ewings (Member)

West Devon Council
cllr.mandy.ewings@westdevon.gov.uk

Councillor Carolyne Culver (Sub)

West Berkshire Council
carolyne.culver1@westberks.gov.uk

Councillor Caroline Topping (Sub)

Suffolk County Council
caroline.topping@suffolk.gov.uk

Safer and Stronger Communities

Councillor Clive Woodbridge (Deputy-chair)

Epsom and Ewell Council
cwoodbridge@epsom-ewell.gov.uk

Councillor Karen Lucioni (Member)

Isle of Wight Council
karen.lucioni@iow.gov.uk

Councillor Chidi Nweke (Sub)

Epping Forest District Council
cllr.cnweke@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Councillor Paul Hillard (Sub)

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
paul.hilliard@bcpcouncil.gov.uk

Councillor Matt Edwards

Bradford City Council
matt.edwards@bradford.gov.uk

Councillor Andrew Walters

Salford City Council
councillor.walters@salford.gov.uk

Councillor Mandy Ewings

West Devon Borough Council
cllr.mandy.ewings@westdevon.gov.uk



Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE, LGA President



Councillor Natalie McVey, Malvern Hills



**Councillor Celia Hibbert,
Wolverhampton**



**Councillors Marianne Overton, Adam
Paynter and Mandy Ewings**



**Councillors Gillian Ford, Marianne Overton MBE, Craig Browne, Sue Baxter and
Jim Hakewill at the 2025 Annual Peer Conference**

LGA Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC)



Councillor Wendy Maples

East Sussex County Council

Chair of the Fire Services Management Committee

It has been a busy and rewarding few months since I took over as Chair of the Fire Services Management Committee (FSMC) from Councillor Frank Biderman in February. I am pleased to reflect on the significant progress we've made in championing the fire and rescue sector and shaping its future direction.

One of the most notable developments this year was the Machinery of Government change with responsibility for Fire transitioning from the Home Office to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in April. This move, with fire now under the leadership of Minister Alex Norris MP, presents a valuable opportunity to align fire and building safety under a single department. We very much welcomed Minister Norris's early engagement, including his participation at the LGA's Annual Fire Conference in March and his upcoming attendance at the Fire Commission in June.

The FSMC has played an active role in shaping the future of the fire sector through our involvement in the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) alongside other key partners in the sector. The MAG has now met twice discussing the fire reform programme, culture and integrity and a potential College of Fire and Rescue. These conversations are vital as we work together to deliver meaningful reform that reflects the needs of our workforce, communities and environment.

Following the publication of the Government's White Paper in December, FSMC has been considering the Government's devolution proposals and their implications for fire and rescue services. Members emphasised the importance of public accountability, scrutiny and transparency in fire governance. We look forward to engaging further on the Government's proposals.

In response to the increasing threat of extreme weather, we convened a joint meeting with the Safer and Stronger Communities Board (SSCB) and the Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board (LINZ). We discussed the growing impact of flooding and wildfires, the role of Local Resilience Forums, and the need for better cross-government coordination on environmental policies. With wildfire incidents already

more than double those of the same period in 2022, this work is more urgent than ever. I look forward to continuing joint work across Boards on these issues.

Culture within the sector has continued to be a key priority: we recently published a scrutiny tool to help fire and rescue authorities hold their senior officers to account for the delivery of cultural improvement. The [IMPROVES Tool³](#) is on the LGA's website.

Our annual Fire Conference in Gateshead brought together over 180 Fire and Rescue Authority Members and senior officers. With high-profile speakers including Alex Norris MP and Sir Andy Cooke, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, the event was a resounding success and an excellent opportunity to hear from colleagues about the challenges the sector faces.

I have also represented the FSMC at key external meetings, including the HMICFRS External Reference Group, where we discussed the new inspection framework and the inclusion of the impact of governance in its inspection framework. I also attended the Fire Performance Oversight Group in April to support services under enhanced monitoring.

Finally, we worked closely with the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) to develop a joint Spending Review submission to the Home Office to inform their work with the Treasury. This highlighted the need for sustainable funding, council tax flexibility, and capital investment to ensure the long-term resilience of our services.

As Chair, I am proud of the FSMC's continuing work and confident that our collaboration will mean we aptly represent the views and concerns of the fire sector to secure best practice for the safety of our communities.

3 local.gov.uk/topics/fire-and-rescue/improves-tool

Children and Young People Board



Councillor Jon Hubbard

Vice-Chair, Children and Young People Board
Wiltshire Council

Independent Group perspective

It's been an incredibly rewarding year serving as the Lead Member for the Independent Group on the Children and Young People Board. The work we've undertaken has directly impacted the lives of children, young people and families across our communities.

Key achievements this year

Best Start in Life: We've made significant progress supporting the expansion of early years entitlements, ensuring councils remain strategic leaders in early years systems. The LGA's Vision for Children, Young People and Families, published in November 2024, sets out our ambitious framework focusing on love, fun, learning opportunities, safety and health.

Supporting Vulnerable Children: Our work on placements for children in care continues to be vital, with research from the National Children's Bureau helping us understand the drivers of high costs. We've also strengthened support for care leavers through our "whole council approach" guidance and collaborated with Coram Voice on positive engagement practices.

SEND Reform: The Board has maintained pressure for urgent SEND system reform, calling for mainstream inclusion, additional high needs funding, and elimination of Dedicated Schools Grant deficits. With £1 billion additional funding announced in the autumn budget, we're seeing some progress, but more work remains.

Mental Health and Youth Services: Our task and finish group on children's mental health, which I chaired, published important recommendations in January, and we continue advocating for investment in youth services and open access mental health provision.

Legislative Engagement

We've actively engaged with the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, successfully lobbying for extended corporate parenting duties and coordinating meetings between Lead Members and senior civil servants. This demonstrates how local government can effectively influence national policy.

Looking forward to 2025/26

Our priorities include supporting new legislation implementation, continuing SEND reform advocacy, maintaining focus on early years transformation, and addressing child poverty through the Government's cross-cutting strategy due in summer 2025.

Personal highlight – LGA Conference

One of my personal highlights this year was chairing the "Exploring Play Sufficiency" session at the LGA Conference in Harrogate. The energy and passion in the room was infectious as we discussed how councils can better support children's right to play. The session brought together practitioners, councillors and young people themselves, creating meaningful dialogue about making our communities more play-friendly. It reinforced my belief that sometimes the most important things we do for children are also the most joyful – ensuring they have safe, accessible spaces to simply be children.

Thank you

Thank you to all Independent Group colleagues who've contributed to this vital work. Together, we're making a real difference to the lives of children and young people across England.



Councillor Jon Hubbard chairing a session at LGA Annual Conference 2024

City Regions Board



Councillor Martin Fodor

Bristol City Council
Deputy Chair City Regions

The Board had a busy, incremental year, with many developing reports and numerous additional events for our group representatives (me and Councillor Geraldine Coggins).

We played an active part in all meetings and workshops.

A new chair was appointed, and the new government agenda became a focus, including devolution and the theme of economic growth.

Work often emerged in conjunction with People and Places or LINZ Board.

We consistently emphasised the need to take account of local circumstances when designing the new regional governance model, and the need for a proportionate approach to representation and elections across larger regions. We pressed for collaborative decision making and ways of ensuring new tiers remain representative of diverse political preferences rather than vesting most power in one individual.

Councillor Coggins pointed out a key to success on Greater Manchester was a tailored package of devolution not focused on a standard deal, rather bespoke packages suited to the area.

Strengthening scrutiny and high standards and transparency in public life were fed into debates. Taking decision making further from localities has been warned by us several times.

With the LGA promoting the new government's agenda we pressed for LGAs voice to be distinctive and not compliant. We also pushed several times for an emphasis on inclusive and sustainable growth not GDP for its own sake. We referred to well-being and thriving places, not gross economic activity as the goals that need to be pursued and measured if possible. The Board did in fact host an international webinar on inclusive growth in cities during the year.

Work on skills, jobs and devolved training emerged after several confidential discussions. We promoted the benefits of place-based training that reflects local opportunities and

benefits of training for new green skills that will contribute to multiple agendas.

Discussing local transport and economic inclusion we emphasised choices that reflect low income and low car ownership: better buses, where and when needed, safe transport services for shift workers, plus micro mobility and car clubs for access to a vehicle if needed.

Public service reform also featured. The proposals to link regional tiers of government to other health and emergency services led to several discussions on boundary issues.

A new topic was the food and drink sector, and we raised issues of sustainable, regional supply chains, the need for food equality strategies, and the precarious workers present throughout the supply chain between field and fork.

The Board also had an opportunity for representatives to join a Ministerial discussion employment and skills during the year, plus a scheduled awayday to Salford to see some of the topics reflected on the ground at a host local authority.

On the subject of diversity, we recommended pensions for councillors and a national plan for allowances - pointing out huge inclusion issues if only those already retired or with financial security become representatives - silencing groups already marginalised, minoritised, or under-represented. Local allowances allow those with the financial privilege and already elected to exclude those who cannot afford to be a councillor. We suggested the Welsh model be adopted and devolution legislation used bring in these changes.

Overall, we feel it's been a productive year with plenty of input from both representatives to Board discussions.

Community Wellbeing Board



Councillor Gillian Ford

London Borough of Havering
Deputy Chair Community Wellbeing Board

Liverpool hosted the 2024 National Children and Adult Services Conference in Liverpool, bringing together sector partners, politicians, officers and partners. I chaired two sessions; Making prevention a national reality and The Future of Supported Housing. In May, we responded to the Supported Housing Consultation agreeing to the introduction of a single, mandatory licensing regime for all supported-housing schemes, a Housing Benefit subsidy, up front multi-year new-burdens funding and a single digital licensing portal and national register.

In December I attended a Ministerial Autism Stakeholder roundtable, chaired by Stephen Kinnock MP. I raised the role councils play in policy development and support for people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence. Work is ongoing in the development of the updated Autism Strategy for 2026. The LGA have supported the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training and the funding for an expansion of community services that both councils and health run, recognising that support needs to be funded across all council services and not just social care.

The Board considered the Penny Dash Review on Strengthening Patient Safety and welcomed Baroness Merron SoS at the DHSC to speak on her priority areas of work.

In February I chaired a webinar entitled, 'What is the best way to provide crisis support'. I also attended the Defence Committee: Armed Forces Covenant meeting in Parliament, and set the scene regarding local authority financial pressures, and new burdens.

The Lead Members contributed to the Health and Social Care Committee Inquiry into Community mental health services, and we had oversight of the Local Government Devolution White Paper; Lord Marmot also attended two Board meetings.

The Fair Pay Agreement was considered, and policy recommendations were provided for the work on unpaid carers, not forgetting children as carers. In March, I attended a Ministerial roundtable with Minister Stephen Kinnock in advance of the launch of the National Supervised Toothbrushing programme for the 3 years – 5 years.

At May's meeting we had an informative presentation from the Royal Osteoporosis Society on the human and financial cost of osteoporosis. It is very cheap to manage yet we are failing to use the opportunities to prevent.

One of the Board's most challenging topics has been the lack of clarity around the NHS 10 Year Plan, what the 50 per cent budget cut for the NHS and ICB's will look like, and what impact will it have on our integrated services and governance structures. There is a move to cluster ICB's reducing them from 44 to about 28. The Board noted the lack of focus on integration and the need for Local Authorities to have a voice at the table. The reconfiguration of councils and the roll out of devolution deals, adds another complexity to place and keeping things local. We advocated the need for preventative services, social care and the wider determinants of health within the review. Hopefully by the time you read this, the conversation will have already moved on to something more positive.

The board also raised concerns over the proposed three-year delivery of Baroness Casey's Adult Social Care Review. The delay is unwelcome as we face the pressures now. We did however welcome the decision to undertake a two-phase approach. National debates continue, and the Kings Fund held an event where guests included Lord Dilnot, and Damien Green – Former First Secretary of State, who is now the Chair of Social Care Foundation. Consensus prevailed that we needed to work together to ensure real change.

Culture, Tourism and Sport Board



Councillor Julie Jones-Evans

Isle of Wight Council

Vice-Chair of the Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

We began our term by promptly engaging with new Government and reviewing our work programme to ensure alignment with the government's five key missions. This strategic approach allowed us to tailor our messaging and evidence to best support the government in recognising the significant contributions that Culture, Tourism, and Sport make to our communities and the economy.

One notable area of contribution was the 'Take Back Our Streets' mission, which focuses on tackling anti-social behaviour, launching Young Futures Hubs, and addressing violence against women and girls. Following the violent disorder in summer, the LGA hosted a webinar for culture and leisure officers. Feedback highlighted that areas maintaining investment in preventative cultural and sporting activities recovered more quickly – or avoided unrest altogether – compared to those that had experienced service cuts.

In our correspondence with Stephanie Peacock MP, Minister for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth, we proposed co-locating youth hubs and neighbourhood health centres within existing council facilities. We emphasised the importance of long-term funding, workforce development, and local delivery to strengthen councils' roles in youth services and supporting grass roots sports.

Devolution and local government reorganisation have been major topics of discussion. We contributed to consultations and debates, raising concerns about the risk to local investment in culture, sport, and tourism. The shift to unitary authorities, with their necessary focus on statutory services like ASC, poses a significant threat to these sectors. These concerns were echoed at the Independent Group Conference I attended in January.

I was honoured to present at the LGA's Leadership Essentials training in Warwick and at a Public Policy Exchange webinar, both focused on cultural regeneration and placemaking. These platforms provided excellent opportunities to showcase the board's work and the compelling evidence that underpins our advocacy.

Although our planned board visit to Leicester in June was cancelled due to the general election, I'm pleased to confirm it will go ahead this June. Our annual conference will be in September in Bradford and promises to be a vibrant two-day event, featuring City of Culture tours and high-profile speakers. I encourage everyone to attend.

I represented our board at the DCMS Creative Industries Summit in Gateshead, led by Secretary of State Lisa Nandy and Minister Sir Chris Bryant – both strong advocates for the sector. I used the opportunity to promote Business and IP Centres (BIPCs), a British Library initiative that supports aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly in the creative industries. BIPCs have an impressive reach, especially among women, disabled individuals, and ethnic minorities, and deliver a return of over £6 for every £1 invested. I strongly support expanding BIPCs across more libraries to drive inclusive economic growth.

Libraries remain trusted, inclusive spaces – whether for reading, community groups, or early years activities – and continue to be cherished by all. I co-chair the Libraries Sounding Board with Arts Council England and recently chaired an inspiring webinar in the lead-up to World Book Day.

Tourism remains a vital part of our economy and heritage. Local government continues to invest significantly in promoting tourism, Local Visitor Economy Partnerships, and the cultural and natural assets that attract visitors. A key topic of debate has been the potential introduction of tourist taxes to help bridge the gap created by the increased funding of statutory services.

I attended the recent DCMS Visitor Economy Summit in Birmingham, where I contributed to workshops on skills, data, and overseas visitors. It was encouraging to see engagement from other departments, including DEFRA and DBT, recognising the importance of this sector.

Following on from a DCMS round table with legendary Chris Boardman and Mayor Burnham, looking at ways we can integrate well-being with getting people into work (cross cutting themes and using resources in joined up ways are important topics at the moment), I was able to introduce this into a program here on the Isle of Wight. DWP sponsor our Youth Hub work program, which assists young people into work using a personalised approach. Our results are three times as successful as the regular Job Centre approach. I was able to add in heavily discounted and some free passes to our council run leisure centres, full access to all classes, pool and gym, so we can use the power of health and fitness to aid our young people. I'm looking forward to the next batch of data and feedback.

Councillor Julie Jones Evans background of Newcastle and Gateshead

Councillor Julie Jones Evans and Councillor Tracy Dixon CTS Board Members at the Glasshouse in Gateshead



Councillor Julie Jones Evans and Councillor Tracy Dixon CTS Board Members at the Glasshouse in Gateshead

Economy and Resources Board



Councillor Ian Stephens

Isle of Wight Council

Deputy Chair of the Economy and Resources Board

The Board has remained highly engaged during what has been a particularly challenging and uncertain period for local government. This has been shaped by a change in central government and ongoing financial pressures on local authorities.

Councils across England are facing rising service demands, inflationary costs, and a funding system that is no longer fit for purpose. The financial sustainability of local government is now under serious threat.

Since the last major reform in 2013/14, councils have experienced increasing strain. Between 2010/11 and 2025/26, core spending power has fallen by 16.4 per cent in real terms (excluding the National Insurance Contributions compensation funding announced in February 2025). This has made it increasingly difficult for councils to meet statutory responsibilities and invest in long-term service improvements.

In response, the Local Government Association (LGA), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) have issued a joint call for urgent reform. The current funding model relies heavily on council tax which raises different amounts of money in different parts of the country, unrelated to need; is based on 1991 property values; and is viewed by some as regressive. The business rates retention system has not been reset in over a decade, leading to growing disparities. Councils also face one-year funding settlements and a fragmented grant system, which hinder long-term planning and innovation.

If no action is taken, councils are projected to face a funding gap of £8 billion by 2028/29 just to maintain current service levels. A joint report proposes immediate reforms, including multi-year settlements, simplification of grant funding, and aligning funding with assessed local need. Longer-term reforms would involve a full review of council tax and business rates, exploring new revenue sources such as local levies, and developing a new central-local partnership model.

The ERB has actively contributed to this agenda, participating in a consultation process that posed ten key questions. The Board submitted a robust and thoughtful

response to ensure its voice is heard. The Government has also announced a consultation in 2025 to review the administration of council tax and consider options for modernisation of support in the system for those who need it.

The LGA has submitted proposals to Phase Two of the Spending Review, forming the basis of a lobbying campaign running through to the Spending Review's publication on 11 June. This campaign is supported by a week-by-week media strategy. Following the Spring Statement on 26 March, the LGA issued a factual briefing. While the Statement focused on welfare and defence, it offered little for local government finance.

The ERB has made strong representations through LGA committee chairs, lead members, and parliamentary evidence sessions. These efforts have been supported by media campaigns highlighting key funding pressures, including the dedicated schools grant deficit, concessionary fares, and rising costs in social care and temporary accommodation.

A significant legislative development has been the enactment of the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Act. This law introduces new multipliers for high-value retail, leisure, and hospitality properties and removes charitable status from private schools – marking a notable shift in the rating system.

Workforce has negotiated pay deals for 2024/25 Local Government (Green Book, Craftworkers and Youth and Community at £1290, also Chief Officers and Chief Executives at 2.5 per cent and Fire at 4 per cent.

The Workforce Team continued to engage regularly with the DfE and DHSC ahead of the reinstatement of the School Support Staff Negotiating (SSSNB) and the introduction of School Support Staff Negotiating Body (ASCNB). We have sought answers from government to important questions relating to the scope of the workforces to be covered by the Bodies; employer representation; concerns about funding future agreements; and have raised concerns about potential equal pay risks that could arise.

The Employment Rights Bill will address a repeal of the Trade Union Act, a ban of some zero-hour contracts, will impact of reforms on existing outsourcing arrangements and expand on pay gap reporting, with a ban on 'fire and rehire'.

Issues also covered by workforce within 2024/25 included National Living Wage, Equal pay, Workforce improvement support, Apprenticeships programme and lobbying on removal of Level 7s and levy flexibility, Combined authorities' HR network, Social work and Occupational Therapy health checks, Recruitment and retention, Supporting early careers, Skills and Capacity support Workforce intelligence (workforce data and surveys), Creating effective organisation structures, Withdrawal from collective bargaining of the Coroners' Society

In closing, I would like to thank my fellow independent members for their valuable contributions to the ERB over the past year.

Improvement and Innovation Board



Councillor Alex Coley

Epsom and Ewell Council

Deputy Chair of the Improvement and Innovation Board

The Improvement and Innovation Board is responsible for sector-led support and improvement for councils, for which we receive a direct grant from MHCLG.

This has been my second year as Deputy Chair and what a year it has been. We said goodbye to Oflog as the new government set out its agenda for reform with a focus on technology front and centre.

Initiatives on cyber, digital and of course AI, have begun new conversations on efficiency and transformation across all the public sector. I was honoured to be asked to Chair a cross-party Task and Finish Group to explore the creation of a Local Government Centre for Digital Technology. We met regularly through autumn and winter, ably supported by an advisory group of technology professionals from across the country. Our findings were submitted as part of the LGA response to the Spending Review and we await its conclusion.

LGA programmes on cyber, digital and technology continue to evolve. Over the last year, we have been developing the following:

- Artificial Intelligence Hub and an AI network, to explore the possibilities of AI and connect with peers.
- Cyber incident grab bag; a practical toolkit that acts as a collection of resources and guidance for responding effectively to cyber incidents.
- LG Inform app, to access and compare data about local areas, on the fly.

These will sit alongside our existing offering of the Cyber 360, Digital 360 review, digitalisation framework, digital almanac and 12 strategic outcomes.

The elephant in the room since December has been the bombshell announcement of Local Government Reorganisation, with many councils to be abolished over the course of this Parliament. Lead members on the Improvement and Innovation Board have been in intense discussions over how the LGA can support those local authorities affected and lobbying government for funding support.

We know that the £7.6m offered by MHCLG will not provide sufficient aid alone to all the councils impacted and have been told that the work supported by the £19.2m improvement grant should be reprioritised to reflect this new demand. Please visit the Devolution and LGR support pages on the LGA website to see the support offer: local.gov.uk/our-support/devolution-and-lgr-hub/devolution-and-lgr-lga-support

A further area of interest has been the National Recruitment Campaign, which has a strong focus on attracting young people to local government. Work is also underway to shape an offer for combined authorities and future strategic authorities. The board also reviewed improvement support achievements from Partners in Care and Health, Children's services improvements, One Public Estate, Planning Advisory Service, Sustainability, Procurement, the Joint Inspection Programme, Culture and Sports improvement and specialist finance and planning graduate programmes.

As we look forward to the LGA Conference in July, the Innovation Zone has several sessions that will be of particular interest to members. Especially for those hoping to learn from the pilots and test programmes other councils will showcase. Once again, AI is a popular subject with a dedicated fringe session, also look out for sessions on temporary accommodation, creating new cultures in a unitary, recruitment, prisoners building homes and tech enabled care.

See you there!

Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board LINZ



Councillor Loic Rich

Cornwall Council

Deputy Chair of the LINZ Board

The new LINZ board evolved out of the former Environment, Economy, Housing, and Transport Board several years ago. 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 Councillor Diana Moore for her support, and also our substitute members who have regularly attended and participated in LINZ board meetings, as well as the substitute members who often attend and participate in board activity.

Climate Change and Environment

On the issue of waste and recycling the LINZ board has been extensively involved in putting the case that councils should have local flexibility and adequate resources for the implementation of the various national waste reforms, including more 'Extended Producer Responsibility' for packaging and dealing with any revenue losses related to the introduction of the Deposit Return Scheme. We are also keeping up the 'polluter pays' principle on these proposed reforms.

We have also been working to accelerate local climate action through effective relationships between national and local government, as well as accelerate the Green Energy Mission.

Housing, planning, and homelessness

I have been pushing for a greater LGA focus on the issue of private rental sector housing, the lack of which in many areas is resulting in greater strains on local government finances, in terms of temporary and emergency accommodation costs, running into millions for many authorities.

Elsewhere the LINZ board has been looking at placing HRAs on a sustainable footing, including working with the housing association sector, to highlight and assess the service implications of its day-to-day income and expenditure pressures.

On building safety, we have been making the case for councils to access the building safety remediation funds available to building owners.

We have also been involved extensively in a comprehensive and informed response to the National Planning Policy Framework planning reforms.

Transport

The Labour Government was elected in July 2024 and since then they have been talking about a new integrated transport strategy, which looks interesting, but not entirely different to previous thoughts on transport integration, and basically common sense if you want public transport to connect with each other in sensible and practical way.

Britain's transport network is under pressure and significant road projects have either been cancelled or scaled back.

As an advocate of active travel and rail, I am motivated by the work of the LINZ board officers in their informed and pragmatic approach to lobbying and responding to government of increasing investment and improving strategy and vision in terms of making Britain better at active travel, especially in new developments and reopening disused rail lines.

Think Tanks discussions

I hope to be able to organise some discussions via the online portal for our Independent group.

It has been a busy year on this board, especially with chairing various online debates and webinars – I hope Independent group colleagues got the chance to attend some.

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.

Thank you

People and Places Board



Councillor Emily O'Brien

Lewes District Council

Deputy Chair of the People and Places Board

It's been a busy year in local government – and a busy year on the People and Places board, as one of two boards where devolution and local government reorganisation are discussed. Our board represent non-metropolitan interests (rural, coastal, market town...) whereas the city regions boards which city interests. Since devolution and LGR play out very differently in different geographies our board as a whole has brought an important perspective to these discussions.

As your Independent Group reps we've also brought a crucial alternative political perspective to the table. We have been very focussed around championing the local and the locally accountable, and have been vocal on the concerns which Independents, Greens and smaller parties about localism, subsidiarity and accountability, which it sometimes felt were in danger of being lost in a version of devolution that felt more like regionalisation; and at times what a stitch up by the two larger parties in the rush to consolidate power by imposing ill-considered structures at breakneck speed.

Specific things we've done are:

Pushed for a climate and nature duty to be included in the LGA position on the new powers and duties at the mayoral strategic level – a 'growth' duty without the equivalent climate and nature duty, as the White Paper suggested, would be deeply skewed.

- Pushed around accountability arrangements for the new mayors.
- Fed in really detailed feedback on proposed arrangements; asked tricky questions; and influenced research areas for the LGA on this agenda.
- Formally requested that the LGA's taskforce on devolution reports back into the board (not the other way round).

Other key areas for the board are inclusive growth and skills, which have also been key government agendas, so we have been busy here too. As board members we have all fed into numerous discussions. and as your lead member I've also

- Influenced the LGA's response to multiple consultations including the Industrial Strategy Green Paper, and Get Britain Working White Paper.
- Attended ministerial round tables in Westminster around the 'Get Britain Working' agenda'.

We have also as a board championed the importance of public transport in non-metropolitan areas, and the role this plays in inclusion, and in skills, with research to back it up. We championed the role that local authorities can play a role in local food economies - crucial in many of our non-metropolitan areas but so often overlooked and joint research with the city regions board produced a useful report From ground to table: the role of local government in local food and drink supply chains⁴.

Huge thanks to our Board representatives (Myself, Councillor Kevin Everidge OBE, Councillor Julian Deane and Councillor Mandy Ewings) and our able subs (Councillor Carolyne Culver and Councillor Caroline Topping). And thanks too to everyone who has contributed via contacting us, at the LGAI conference where I was pleased to be part of a panel on this and we celebrated Kevin's birthday with cake; though special meetings such as the LGAI meeting on the Devolution White paper; or through the People and Places discussion on the on-line platform – please do join it!

It's my last year in this role so I'd like to offer a huge thank you the Independent Group Office team for their fabulous support and wisdom, and to everyone who has played a part ensure our voices get heard.

4 <https://lga.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s48661/4%20-%20PPB%20-%20From%20Ground%20to%20Table%20Cover%20Report.pdf>

Safer and Stronger Communities Board



Councillor Clive Woodbridge

Epsom and Ewell Council
Deputy Chair of the SSCB

As always the work of the Board has been extremely wide ranging and varied, and Independent Group members, including myself and Board Member, Councillor Karen Lucioni; and substitutes Councillor Mandy Ewings; Councillor Chidi Nweke; Councillor Andrew Walters; and Councillor Matt Edwards have made consistent and positive contributions throughout the process, influencing the outcomes of discussions and shaping debates.

The Board had responsibility for leading the LGA's response to the 2024 riots and agreed a work programme in relation to this in September. The Board's response built on the work that SSCB has been doing for several years around community cohesion, for example through the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism and included an update to the LGA guidance on countering mis/disinformation as well as a series of regional workshops for councillors on cohesion. The Board also gave evidence to the Women and Equalities Select Committee inquiry into community cohesion and, to support councils delivering the evolving Communities Strategy, the SSCB team helped LGA secure £140,000 in funding from MHCLG to work with the cohesion network, Belong. That work is now under way.

In terms of resilience and emergency planning, the Board considered reports and recommendations from the COVID Inquiry Module 1 and Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase Two and agreed a work programme to influence the government's ongoing resilience work. The Board has successfully shaped government policy in this area, and has been discussing with the Cabinet Office and the UK Resilience Academy wider access to the training that has been provided to the civil service around emergency responses and raised a range of issues with government on how councils role in responding to civil emergencies can be improved. The Board also considered the LGA's policies in relation to extreme weather events, together with the Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board, which marked the start of hopefully a positive process of joint Board working.

Over the last year the Board has considered a range of topics related to the Government's Safer Streets mission, and received a detailed paper on issues around knife crime and the role councils can play in reducing it. It also submitted views to the Ministry of Justice's independent sentencing review; gave evidence to the committee considering the Crime and Policing Bill; developed proposals to reform the process for conducting domestic and related death reviews with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners; and conducted a joint survey with Resolve on councils work to address anti-social behaviour.

The implications of future technology was a theme running through several items of work. For example, the Board considered the regulation of automated vehicles following the passing of the Automated Vehicles Act 2024, which creates the automated passenger services permitting regime. This is designed to address the gaps in current licensing frameworks which assume there is a human driver of the taxi or private hire vehicle.

Of course, there was also regular discussion on issues relating to English Devolution and Local Government Reform. The Board held a special meeting in February to consider the impact of the Devolution White Paper on areas within the Board's remit, and this informed the LGA's wider work around devolution and local government reorganisation.

Underlining the wide ranging nature of the Board's remit, over the year it also input into reviews of the future of food regulation by the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Culture Media and Sports review of gambling legislation; continued to support councils in addressing modern slavery; submitted views to the Law Commission's consultation on changes to burial and cremation law; responded to recommendations from the Marine Accident Investigation Bureau on improvements to water safety; and provided evidence to the Fuller Inquiry into the regulation of mortuary and body storage provision. Upcoming items of discussion include the role of councils in the challenge of reducing the escalating number of mobile phone thefts.

Congress of the Council of Europe



Councillor Linda Gillham

Runnymede Council

The Congress is the Local Authority level of the Council of Europe. It is made up of 46 countries across the European continent and among others Sir Winston Churchill was instrumental in setting it up after the Second World War.

All country members are signed up to the Charter of Local Self Government and members of Congress will visit and review how the Parliaments and Local Authorities are functioning on a regular basis.

However, one of the most important functions of the Congress is to monitor local elections and teams are chosen from the members to spend about four days in a country talking to participant organisations and then observing the election process on the day. This starts in a polling station observing the boxes being sealed and finishes at the count. During the day each team will visit several polling stations and finally a report is written documenting the observation.

Members of Congress also debate and write reports on issues of governance and social inclusion.

In October 2024 I had the opportunity to present a paper on the circular economy and the responsibilities of Local Government to ensure all elements of our service delivery to residents is attuned to the importance of addressing climate change.

This was an excellent opportunity to look at the many roles of local government beyond recycling and consider how we can adjust or change to better understand the impact of what we deliver.

One of the strengths of the Congress is that each country sends a youth delegate to the plenary sessions. These young people participate in debates and always remind us that we are looking at the leaders of tomorrow!

I think that we would all acknowledge that their interventions are thought provoking and it reminds me that we should do more to introduce youth participation in our own local authorities.



UK delegation to the Council of Europe from October 2024

Council of European Municipalities and Regions



Report on the Council of European Municipalities and Regions Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

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!

County Councils Network (CCN)



Julian German

Cornwall Council

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

The County Councils Network (CCN) is a cross-party organization representing 37 county and unitary authorities. It acts as the voice of counties, advocating for their interests. The CCN plays a crucial role in shaping policy, commissioning research, and providing evidence-based solutions to issues impacting local communities.

Established in 1997, the CCN is a special interest group of the Local Government Association. It represents approximately 26 million residents, covers 86 per cent of England's landmass, and manages a significant portion of the country's GVA, social care spending, and local road infrastructure.

The CCN's influence extends to Parliament and government, with its reports and advocacy shaping debates on local services and influencing policy decisions. The CCN's work often leads to concessions from government, ensuring the needs and concerns of county councils are addressed. In essence, the CCN serves as a vital bridge between local councils and the wider political landscape, advocating for the well-being of communities and the future of local services.

CCN's objectives are:

- **Influence policy at national level.** Act as the voice for county and unitary councils, advocating and representing members' views across Whitehall, within the LGA, and to key influencers.
- **Produce original research and policy solutions.** Produce or commission original research to support the development and advocacy of innovative policy solutions, addressing the unique demographic, financial and geographical challenges facing counties and their residents.
- **Enhance the profile of CCN.** Continue to raise the profile of CCN, lead members and officers through development of strong, impactful and consistent external and internal communications alongside a targeted public affairs strategy.

- **Support member councils and share best practice.**
- **Act as a gateway to Whitehall for member councils.** Share intelligence and best practice to support member councils and public sector partners to continue to be the most effective and efficient organisations in the public sector.
- **Corporate resilience.** Identify strategic risks and set out organisational and financial strategies to ensure the network is resilient and sustainable over the short, medium and long term.

Big issues worked on throughout the last year have included: finance, health and social care, Special Education Needs and Disabilities, local government reform, home to school transport and children's services.

Thank you to the LGA Independent Group for the opportunity to serve as Group Leader and therefore Vice Chair of CCN.

District Councils Network (DCN)



Councillor Hannah Dalton

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
DCN Vice Chair

2024 has been a watershed year for District Councils; in April many celebrated fifty years since they were established, followed in December with the publication of the 'English Devolution Whitepaper' signalling the most significant change to the local government landscape of the past fifty years.

At a time when there was a need for a strong collective voice for councils and communities, the District Councils' Network (DCN) has stood front and centre through our advocacy and influence.

This advocacy has included extensive media coverage highlighting topics including devolution, Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), housing, planning and homelessness and placed them in the national spotlight. Concerns about the 500k minimum population size for new unitaries featured prominently in the national broadsheet newspapers, TV news bulletins as well as on the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme, BBC Radio 2 Jeremy Vine show and Times Radio.

We continued to grow our influence in Parliament, giving the issues that matter to member councils' greater prominence with MPs, peers, select committees and ministers, and in the last year, DCN gave evidence to more select committee inquiries than ever before and delivered training to new MPs.

The Affordable Housing Blueprint was launched in January, containing a range of tangible recommendations to increase the supply of affordable housing. Its publication has prompted MHCLG to begin to investigate one of the main recommendations: to increase the Housing Revenue Accounts (HRA) threshold.

In February, I was honoured to host our event which celebrated '130 years of a woman's right to stand' event. Joined by serving MPs we recognised and celebrated the first ever women councillors, our many brilliant councillors today, and encouraged more people from underrepresented groups to consider standing for elected office.

With the publication of the report on 'Growth, Reform and Trust'⁵ in March, we set out how we can respond to the challenges and opportunities of LGR.

Other important DCN policy wins in the last year include:

- Big increases to planning application fees and draft legislation that will give planning authorities full flexibility to set fees locally.
- Increased funding to support councils affected by Internal Drainage Board levies.
- Government commitment to multi-year finance settlements.
- Government commitment to look at greater flexibilities for local authorities without HRA to build more social homes.

Looking forward to the next year

Through a programme of webinars and events DCN will continue to support its membership to develop final LGR proposals using giving practical advice on how to implement it effectively.

This year we will launch a toolkit that will set out the characteristics of successful adult and children's services including how to determine the best model for delivering these services based on local circumstances and on a smaller-than-county footprint.

We will continue to build on our Parliamentary influence to ensure that the issues that matter to member councils have prominence with MPs, peers, select committees and ministers, as well as campaign on these in the national media.

Finally, thanks to the LGA Independent Group DCN Executive Board members, Councillors Paul Harvey, Mandy Ewings, Andy Mellen, Richard Siddall and Noel Ovenden for their insightful Board contributions and advocacy.



With Clive Betts MP, who I chaired a Housing Select Committee information gathering session for



Giving evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee

⁵ districtcouncils.info/growth-reform-and-trust-creating-places-that-deliver-the-potential-of-lgr/

Local Partnerships Board



Councillor Julian German

Cornwall Council
Member

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

Programme Management Office (PMO) Toolkit: They developed and rolled out a comprehensive PMO toolkit to help local authorities improve project management capacity and capability. This toolkit has been adopted by several councils to enhance governance and delivery of complex projects

Transformation Support: Local Partnerships continued to support councils across England and Wales with transformation programmes, helping them redesign services to be more efficient, sustainable, and citizen-focused

Award-Winning EV Procurement: Local Partnerships, in collaboration with the Welsh Government, won the Best Procurement Delivery Award at the 2024 GO Awards. This was for their innovative electric vehicle (EV) procurement initiative, which streamlined access to EVs for public sector bodies.

Personally, I am really keen that councils do all they can to secure the energy security of their place and Ynni Cymru is the Welsh Governments response to this. The programme has been supported by Local Partnerships and they could support your council too.

The four objectives of Ynni Cymru are:-

- To expand locally owned renewable energy used and generated in Wales.
- To optimise the efficiency and effectiveness of locally owned renewable energy use and generation projects.
- To accelerate the transition and deployment of smart local energy systems across Wales.
- To facilitate a just transition to net zero, retaining the benefits for Welsh communities.

Local Partnerships is an in-house public sector delivery partner, jointly owned by the Local Government Association (LGA), HM Treasury, and the Welsh Government. It serves central government departments, the Welsh Government, councils, and combined authorities, focusing on transforming public services. Their work includes supporting infrastructure projects, addressing climate change, and implementing place-making initiatives. They provide expert advice, practical resources, and project delivery support to help public services thrive.

In essence, Local Partnerships acts as a key bridge between local and central government, aiming to deliver value and efficiency for the public purse. They offer a range of services, including helping local authorities with contract management through the Contract Management Pioneer Programme (CMPP), which provides learning and development opportunities for contract managers. Additionally, they offer free tools, templates, and guidance on contract management.

Local Partnerships also plays a significant role in supporting the operational stages of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts, maintaining close relationships with sponsoring departments and the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA). They contribute to the public sector by maximizing commercial value and ensuring that their support aligns with strategic and policy objectives. Ultimately, Local Partnerships strives to make a positive impact at the local level by accelerating delivery and optimizing outcomes.

Thank you to the LGA Independent Group for the opportunity to serve on the Local Partnerships Board.

If you think I can be of assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at cllr.julian.german@cornwall.gov.uk or on 07737 183 690



Councillor Julian German – Local Partnerships Board Members

Commercial Property Boards



Councillor Wisdom Da Costa B.Sc, 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.

Its role is especially important as the municipal world, LGA Member authorities, face unprecedented levels of change whilst also experiencing extreme pressures on revenue and resources.

To help ensure that the LGA is able to support its members to high levels of excellence, in this perfect storm, it needs to maintain and develop funding streams over and above income from subscriptions from member authorities and from Government grants. It is the Commercial Advisory Board that is charged with this role.

NB These funding streams also need to be aligned with the LGA objectives.

The Commercial Advisory Board (CAB) comprises four politicians one from each of the political groups (Labour; Conservative, Liberal Democrat Independent including Greens) and is currently chaired by the Labour member though, this will be amended to reflect the new group for the Reform Party.

The responsibilities for the CAB also include the “oversight of its two properties at 18 Smith Square and Layden House”.

Following on from my last report, during the year the Commercial Advisory Board has been instrumental in developing the LGA’s Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Approved by the LGA Board in March 2025; The Medium-term Financial Strategy outlines how the LGA will maintain a strong and resilient financial position, ensuring we can continue to support our members effectively over the next five years. The strategy explores ways to diversify our income and identify new funding opportunities, helping us to further strengthen the support we provide to councils. At its heart, this approach gives us a solid yet adaptable financial foundation, allowing us to grow, respond to

challenges, and continue serving councils and their communities both now and in the future.

Following the implementation of the MTFS, work has begun to develop a comprehensive Commercial strategy to support the achievement of objectives of MTFS. The Commercial strategy will take a holistic view on the LGA's sources of income, dissect directorates' income targets to individual teams' level and match them with identified opportunities for generating new income. The strategy will also include policy frameworks and, in the accompanying action plan, proposals for new activities with significant income generation potential to address the medium to long-term income needs of the LGA. All activities will form on overarching action plan as an addendum to the strategy. The CAB aims to present the new strategy and action plan for the LGA Board's approval in September 2025.

Work continues a-pace with teams across the LGA to identify and implement income generation opportunities that will contribute to the respective directorates' income targets, as well as with external organisation. The identified activities will be included in the overarching action plan as part of the new Commercial Strategy and, management of the existing income streams and ventures as well as new investments and the exploration of new ventures are overseen by the Commercial Advisory Board.

To give you a sense of proportion and scale, commercial activities contributed £13.7m (18%) to the LGA's objectives in 2024/25. This is expected to increase by a whopping £2.5m (+19%) during the current municipal year, with forceful plans for year-on-year increases thereafter. All to support the LGA's member centric activities.

My personal ambition for the Commercial Advisory Board continues which is to help the LGA become thought and practice leaders, helping it to provide excellent and economic solutions to 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 will continue to support the LGA's excellent officers to thread the needle and to develop its commercial operations with increasing success, to add value to LGA members in the ever more complicated, and fast changing municipal world.



Independent Group Office



Abigail Gallop

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

There has been a huge amount of change this year. The LGA's new Chief Executive has been getting started and there has been an almost total change to the LGA's Senior Leadership Team. This has introduced new ways of working and several reviews of the LGA's staffing, capabilities and practices, including a refreshed vision and purpose of the organisation, a new Strategic Framework, business plan and a review of governance, amongst others. As a member of the Extended Leadership Team and the Operating Team this has certainly been keeping me busy. I'm expecting a lot more change in the forthcoming year.

We have also had a huge national change with a new Labour Government, introducing the biggest changes to local government since 1972. The English Devolution White Paper and subsequent legislation will radically change the local government landscape, creating a power base in the single elected Mayors and driving power and influence up to principle (unitary) and strategic (combined) authorities. In addition, we have had the new National Planning Policy Framework, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, the Employment Rights Bill, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, Great British Energy, Mental Health Bill, Public Authorities Bill, Renters' Rights Bill, Tobacco and Vapes Bill, as well as APPGs, select committees, inquiries, etc. The LGA's policy, public affairs and communications teams have been working tirelessly on all of these alongside our members on the LGA policy boards and with the Group Offices. The LGA's legal team also continue to work on behalf of all our members, representing the sector in the COVID-19 Inquiry.

The announcement of the General Election in July meant the LGA Annual Conference had to shift to October and all the usual events we would expect had to be changed as well. Thank you to all our members who attending our Annual General Meeting (AGM) online in July.

We were once again supported by the LGA's Public Affairs team at the Green Party Conference, and it was fantastic to meet and speak with so many of our Green Party members.

The LGA Annual Conference came round in October and brimming with knowledge exchange and our members. It was a difficult Special General Meeting to discuss the motion to change the Group's name and I know our members were frustrated with the discussion and the outcome. On the back of that meeting we have been reviewing how and whether we can adequately host a hybrid AGM at an event such as the LGA Annual Conference, which is not set up to be hybrid. We have also added the role of Chair of the AGM to our elected post holders to give that role the status it deserves. I am hoping that the changes to the constitution that were agreed at the Special General Meeting will also help the AGMs running more smoothly in the future.

It has been fantastic again to lead on the Group's Next Generation programme with our National Lead Peer, Councillor Adam Paynter, working with an excellent cohort of our councillors keen to stretch themselves on behalf of their communities. This year we really focused on setting a trajectory to taking control of a council and transformation.

It's excellent that our members have been taking advantage of our highly regarded Leadership Essentials and Leadership Academy.

Sadly, I was too unwell to attend our annual Independent Group Conference which took place in January at the Chartered Institute of Management in Cookham, near Maidenhead. I'd like to thank our staff in the Group Office, Rodrigo Sanchez and Noleen Rosen, for delivering the event, which has received excellent feedback.

We are a small team for the breadth that we deliver. As well as ensuring that we answer queries and support our 3000-strong membership, Executive and Leadership, we agree all LGA policies, positions, press work, and publications to ensure they meet the expectations of our members and reflect political consensus. We support our members on the LGA policy Boards and other committees and Boards to navigate the papers and put forward our Group's position, including supporting our Directors on the LGA Company Board. We respond to Government announcements and consultations where the issues are important to our members, providing briefings, meetings and setting up training. We work across all the directorates at the LGA to ensure we are a member-led and politically astute organisation. I work closely with the LGA's regional teams and our leadership team to curate and target support where it is most needed. We deliver our own annual conference, the Group's role at the LGA Annual Conference and support party political conferences where they are in our Group. We work with MPs and members of the House of Lords on legislation alongside the LGA's public affairs team.

Rodrigo in the team has a focus on delivering and managing the Be a Councillor programme alongside the weekly bulletin, leaders and opposition leaders' meetings, Group Leaders' diary and our social media presence.

Noleen in the team has a focus on our improvement and peer support work, working with the regional teams to allocate peers to corporate peer challenges and mentoring assignments, ensuring our peer support work delivers, delivering the annual Independent Group Conference, LGA Board pre-meetings as well as managing our contact and information databases, finances, website and support to the office.

As a team we must be across all of what Government is doing as well as what the LGA is doing, which makes the Group Office an interesting and challenging place to be.

As I write this, we are starting the Group's elections for a new Group Leader, Deputy Leader and Treasurer/Chair of the AGM. I'd like to acknowledge the amazing work Councillor Marianne Overton MBE has done as Leader of the Independent Group over the past 14 years. I worked with Marianne firstly in my roles within the LGA policy team, particularly on developing the LGA Model Code of Conduct and the award-winning Civility in Public Life programme. It's been a privilege to work with Marianne in my role as Head of the Independent Group Office as the membership has grown and evolved. I personally wish her the very best as I'm sure she will continue to advocate for a diverse and truly accountable democracy, with independents and smaller parties. It may seem a small thing, but having the BBC separate out independents, not just 'others' as part of their election reporting is a significant step in raising awareness that you don't have to belong to a party to stand and you don't have to vote for a political party for your voice to be heard.



Rodrigo Sanchez

Political Officer to the Independent Group
Local Government Association (LGA)
rodrigo.sanchez@local.gov.uk

It has been another year travelling up and down the country in support of various events and conferences, particularly leading our own office 'Be a Councillor' programme. Thank you to our regional lead peers for leading and supporting these important events, aimed at individuals interested in standing for public office and making a difference. Looking ahead, our aim for 'Be a Councillor' is to change the format of our delivery sessions into a more curriculum based classroom, focusing on the key elements everyone should know about standing for public office: from understanding how to fill a nomination form to getting to grips with council business in the first few weeks of getting elected. I also look forward to working with our new leadership team from July and getting involved more with corporate peer reviews. Thank you to all our members for their support this past year!



Noleen Rosen

Political Assistant
Local Government Association (LGA)
Noleen.rosen@local.gov.uk



Abigail Gallop and Rodrigo Sanchez set up at Annual Conference 2024



CoR UK Network Group with representatives from the UK nations



Councillors Marianne Overton and Anne Dorrian at Parliamentary Reception 2025



Independent Group Next Generation 2024/2025



Councillor Craig Browne



Councillor Emily O'Brien – local by-election campaigning



Councillor Gillian Ford and Councillor Marianne Overton

Councillors Paul Harvey, Marianne Overton and Caroline Jackson



Councillors and Head of Group Office at Parliamentary Reception 2025

Councillor Alex Coley with Juliet Whitworth at Parliamentary Reception 2025





Councillor Overton with Green Councillor Member Peers at LGA Peer Conference 2025

Independent Group Member Peers at LGA Peer Conference 2025



Councillors Marianne Overton, Craig Browne at LGA Conference 2024

Councillors Gillian Ford, Anne Dorrian, Anne Hooks, Jo Beavis, Marianne Overton, Noel Ovenden and Head of Group Office at Parliamentary Reception 2025





Local Government Association

18 Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000

Email info@local.gov.uk

www.local.gov.uk

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