

Local Government: Tough Times Ahead? NJ 14th November 2022

On Friday 28th October, at the end of an important week for Westminster politics, I attended the Annual Local Government Association Independent Group Conference. As it was my first time attending, I wasn't sure what to expect. Here is my report. Issues such as the forthcoming budget and voter-ID came up. Tightening up was how many foresaw the coming months.

The LGA Independent Group represents Councillors in England and Wales who are not members of the three main Westminster Parties. In the current climate this 'apolitical' grouping will be attractive to many who feel their elected representatives are not representing them.

The size and reach of Independent Councillors is generally under-appreciated, even though their numbers are steadily growing. The BBC seems to avoid mentioning them, for example when they came fourth in this year's May elections.

The LGA Independent Group represents just over 3,000 Councillors. The majority (just over 2,500) are Independent or Resident Association Councillors with the balance made up by Green Party, Plaid Cymru and smaller party Councillors. In the absence of a party whip they can actually do the job of representing residents.

The conference was attended by just under 100 delegates in person with more joining online. Whilst parties such as Reform and UKIP are members of the LGA group, they were not represented on the day. Their twitter presence may be strong, but Independents who are less active on twitter tend to be stronger on the ground.

The conference was Chaired by Marianne Overton, Vice Chairman of the LGA and an independent Councillor. In her introduction one of the many issues she raised was compulsory voter-IDs. She cited a recent test where around 10% of people were unable to vote, a level she felt was unacceptable. The LGA Independent Group recently voted against their introduction, alongside Labour and the Liberal Democrats. At this stage it is unclear whether there will be an attempt to introduce them, but with just six months to go before the next local elections, hopefully this is unlikely.

The Green Peer Nathalie Bennet also opposes voter-ID. She spoke later in the day. Her House of Lords colleague Lord Richard Best had given the keynote speech. They are both cross-bench peers and illustrate the powerful relationship between the House of Lords and the LGA. Much legislation is 'refined' by the Lords, where the cross-bench or independent peers hold the balance of power. They often rely on the LGA and Independent Councillors to understand how legislation works in practice. Lord Best provided an example where more 'on the ground' input could have helped improve legislation. He noted that, whilst Councils had been given powers to stop landlords renting out properties with low energy efficiency ratings, they lacked resources to enforce them. There is little point introducing legislation if it isn't enforced.

The most interesting session was on economic outlook and funding. It was realistic and therefore rather pessimistic! The consensus was that the past two years have been tough and the covid era is now over. The government's budget statement has been put back, with a mixture of spending cuts and tax rises expected, and so "tightening-up" was expected. Councils are expecting increases in demand e.g. for social care. Given that they have already had funding cuts some hoped for more emergency handouts (which are helpful, but make planning difficult).

Inflation was clearly a problem. I asked CEBR Economist Vicky Price about the impact of the war in Ukraine on inflation; her answer implied that inflation had tripled as a result of the war. Whilst bringing the war to an end is clearly beyond the remit of the local Councillors attending, it would clearly help all of us on the financial front.

There was another session on the impact of climate change. This was generally accepted as a priority and part of the local Council's remit. Having said that, putting some measures in place was clearly difficult. Challenges ranged from lack of resources referred to above to a more general conceptual problem of not getting things done. The conceptual problem was presented by academic Dr Tim Rayner, which he referred to these as 'lock-ins.' These were things which could have been done, but which did not get happen, and so there was a lost opportunity. My take out from this session was that there will continue to be more talk than action on climate change.

Other, more traditional, environmental issues were raised in discussions. These included the preservation of green spaces, biodiversity renewal and natural regeneration e.g. of hedgerows. It was good to see that these issues had not been left behind by a narrow focus on climate change. I tabled a note on tackling rural light pollution, showing how solar lights can be bad for the environment. There was some interest in taking this further under a general 'pollution' heading which would include noise, air and in my mind the 'psychological' pollution of CCTV surveillance (sometimes referred to as the 'chilling effect').

Over lunch delegates were given short slots to talk about subjects of their own choice. There were talks about an app to provide candidate or Councillor profiles, an initiative to bring people together and an amusing presentation involving a large number of anacronyms. This was followed by a session on the year ahead followed by workshops on civility in public life (drawing on the LGA's Debate Not Hate work published over the summer), being effective in opposition and in administration (two separate workshops) and one I ran on preparing for the May 2023 local elections.

Whilst there are clearly going to be challenges for local Councils in the next year, the overall mood amongst the Independent Group was optimistic. Their numbers have steadily increased in recent years and it was felt that the May 2023 local elections will offer a further opportunity to increase those numbers. There will be elections in 179 District Councils, 33 Metropolitan Councils and 46 Unitary Authorities. The stats are looking good for the Independent Group with their involvement in the leadership of 79 councils across England and Wales and some presence in 307 authorities (92% of councils in England and Wales).

A guide to the local elections is on our website. <https://www.thedemocraticnetwork.org/local-elections/> This includes a link to the LGA (Local Government Association) guide to standing as a Councillor. It's easier to make a difference at a local level by standing or supporting candidates. Our website includes a survey you can complete to let us know what's important to you; you can also request information about how to get involved. For many of us outside London this will be our first chance to vote following events of the past three years. If we want to send a signal to the Westminster Parties, Independents are well worth supporting. Their pledge is to simply do the job of representing local people.

Nigel Jacklin is a statistician and market researcher. He set up The Democratic Network in January 2021 to help people get involved in local elections. You can follow him on twitter @APoliticalNtwk