

Agenda Item No 10

Local Government Association**Chief Executive**

The purpose of this report is to highlight the benefits of the Council remaining as a member of the Local Government Association (LGA). As a member of the Local Government Association, we are part of a strong, collective voice for local government, whose purpose is to argue the case for and advance the cause of local government. Council members and officers have the opportunity to contribute to and influence discussions with government and other national players in a number of different ways, and are kept informed of the outcomes.

Cabinet member(s): John Fuller	Ward(s) affected: All
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1. Background

- 1.1. Members will recall that the Chief Executive was requested to present a report on the implications of withdrawing from the Local Government Association (LGA) and the purpose of this report is to highlight the benefits of the Council remaining as a member.
- 1.2. In 1997, local government came together and created the Local Government Association to be its voice in the national arena. The LGA is a voluntary lobbying organisation acting as the voice of the local government sector, and an authoritative and effective advocate on its behalf. In fulfilling this role the LGA target their efforts on the issues that matter most to councils, working with and on behalf of the membership to deliver the shared vision of an independent and confident local government sector, where local priorities drive public service improvement in every city, town and village and every councillor acts as a champion for their ward and for the people they represent.
- 1.3. The LGA works as part of the wider LGA Group to assist the members to:
 - 1.3.1. shape public debate
 - 1.3.2 influence policy and practice in public services

- 1.3.3 support innovation and excellence that enables in councils and their partnerships to meet future challenges
 - 1.3.4 help councillors exercise their democratic accountability and leadership effectively
 - 1.3.5 ensure that the sector attracts, retains and develops staff with the skills it needs
- 1.4. There are 353 councils in England and Wales, 351 of which are in LGA membership (only the London Borough of Bromley and North Somerset Council are not members). As a result, the power of all of the authorities working and speaking together to influence policy making at Whitehall is vastly more persuasive than each council acting singly. Indeed, this principle is often adopted by this Council, by joint working and joint lobbying of Whitehall on certain issues.
- 1.5. The LGA members together represent over 50 million people and spend around £113 billion a year on local services. They include county councils, metropolitan district councils, English unitary authorities, London boroughs, shire district councils and Welsh unitary authorities, along with fire authorities, police authorities, national park authorities and passenger transport authorities.
- 1.6. As a member of the Local Government Association, we are part of a strong, collective voice for local government, whose purpose is to argue the case for and advance the cause of local government. Council members and officers have the opportunity to contribute to and influence discussions with government and other national players in a number of different ways, and are kept informed of the outcomes.
- 1.7. This does not of course mean we are not also free to lobby Whitehall individually, however the LGA can represent all 18,000 politicians and speak with a much more powerful voice than one, relatively small, district council on its own.

2. Benefits of membership

- 2.1. The benefits of membership of the LGA include:
- 2.1.1. Allocated places on the General Assembly of the LGA, which meets twice yearly – once in December and once in July prior to the annual conference. At present Cllr John Fuller is the nominated member and attends the General Assembly meetings.
 - 2.1.2. The opportunity to sit on one of the Association's boards, panels or commissions, who provide political steer to our policy development and lobbying campaigns. Cllr Jeremy Savage is a member of the Rural Commission, whose purpose is to provide the forum in which rural authorities can discuss matters of common concern, exchange good practice and experience, assist the LGA to take into account the needs, priorities and aspirations of rural authorities and help the LGA to promote the role and interests of rural authorities.
 - 2.1.3. The opportunity to join a Special Interest Group.

- 2.1.4 Access to the LGA improvement partnerships, established particularly to support excellent and poor & weak councils.
- 2.1.5 Members and officers may be invited to join one of the Association's many task groups or advisory networks, ensuring that all the LGA's work is grounded in the experience of local councils.
- 2.1.6 The opportunity to attend quarterly briefing meetings for District Leaders, which meets quarterly.
- 2.1.7 The opportunity to attend the annual Conference at which Cllr Fuller as a General Assembly member, has the opportunity to meet and influence key figures in local government, including ministers and leaders of other councils.

3. Achievements of the LGA

- 3.1. The major part of the LGA's job is to influence the decisions made in Whitehall and this is done in a number of ways, from assisting councillors and officers to appear before parliamentary select committees, to bringing key ministers to speak at conferences, to ensuring senior figures in the LGA meet frequently with senior politicians. The LGA's policy boards and advisors have daily contact with the civil servants who draft the policy, ensuring that the needs of local government is thought about at all times.
- 3.2. The media team at the LGA is a key element as the British press needs a central contact and the LGA media team acts as local councils' press office. The media team generate positive stories as well as providing the facts behind many stories and defending local councils where necessary. The LGA was mentioned 2192 times in national and local press last year and this quote from a BBC correspondent proves their worth, "the LGA..... is a body journalists naturally turn to for comment and reaction. They're quick to respond and produce a wealth of well-researched surveys and reports on everything from recycling to council gobbledegook."
- 3.3. There have been a number of achievements in areas outside of district council's responsibility, such as child protection. The areas more directly affecting this council are as follows:
 - 3.3.1. Crime and community safety – stopping the government's proposal for direct elections for police authorities. On the basis of LGA evidence, the government scrapped the flawed proposals
 - 3.1.2 Responding to research by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the LGA defended councils who were providing adequate services for victims of domestic violence, highlighting the flaws in the research.
 - 3.1.3 The LGA worked with central government to ensure that the free swimming programme was properly designed to support local arrangements. As a result of the lobbying participating councils have seen a 20% increase to the funding.

- 3.1.4 The LGA is working closely with the Office for National Statistics to ensure that the 2010 funding decisions are based on the most accurate statistics possible.
- 3.1.5 The LGA built a new system to provide better information in relation to pay, workforce and demographics that councils are asked for from a range of agencies. The LGA actively follow the “collect once and use many times” approach thus reducing the burden on councils.
- 3.1.6 The communities and local government select committee held an inquiry into the balance of power between central and local government and the LGA’s publication “One country, two systems “ defined the debate.
- 3.1.7 The collapse of the Icelandic banking sector led to real concerns about council investments and saw allegations of mismanagement. The LGA was at the forefront of rebutting these allegations.
- 3.1.8 The LGA secured an extra £75m for local councils to help them deal with the additional benefit and council tax claims.
- 3.1.9 The LGA’s lobbying on the housing bill ensured that the new Homes and Communities Agency did not take excessive powers from councils.
- 3.1.10 The LGA has secured a number of changes to the CAA process, ensuring that inspections are tailored to local circumstances.

4. Proposal

- 4.1. The proposal is that this Council continues to be a member of the LGA, for the reasons outlined above.

5. Other Options

- 5.1. Members could decide to recommend that South Norfolk Council could cease being a member of the LGA, thus saving the annual subscription, however this would mean losing the benefits as outlined in this report.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1. There are a number of benefits and advantages to remaining as a member of the LGA and if we want our voice to be heard, at this stage in the changing role of local government, it would benefit South Norfolk Council to remain a member of this pivotal organisation.

7. Action required

- 7.1. That members recommend to Cabinet that South Norfolk Council continues to be a member of the LGA by paying the subscription of £15,508.58 pa.

Scrutiny of South Norfolk Council's Membership of the LGA

Questions to Cllr Daubney, Leader of Borough Council of Kings Lynn and West Norfolk:

1. What were the main reasons for the decision to withdraw from the LGA?

A. I was angry that The LGA seemingly refused to give support to those Norfolk District Authorities who had come together to oppose proposals for unitary arrangements. At a November 2008 conference attended by leaders of this council and S Norfolk, The chairman of The LGA actually praised the efforts of John Healey in promoting unitary solutions. I asked the LGA to support the stance being taken by Norfolk District councils. That support was denied.

Since then we have had correspondence with The LGA – they have expressed sympathy and have sought reassurance from the leadership of the Shadow Minister

2. What research and/or consultations did you carry out to assist your decision?

A. Correspondence and conversations with the Chair of The LGA and leader of The Conservative group on the LGA. Legal obligations were researched, cost savings were researched.

3. Have you experienced any impact so far, if not, what impact do you anticipate?

A. Difficult to answer. We are still members since we are required to give 12 months notice. We have in any event put a ban on attendance to conferences etc for budgetary reasons

4. What steps will you be taking to minimise any risks you may have identified as a result of your decision?

A. We have still to identify actions – if any

5. Have you publicised this decision, if so, have you received any response from the public?

A. There has been no response from the public.

6. Apart from the saving of the subscription, what difference has withdrawing from the LGA made to Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council and its operations

A. None that is noticeable to date

EVIDENCE GATHERED BY THE SCRUTINY OFFICER REGARDING COUNCILS THAT ARE NOT A MEMBER OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (LGA).

The London Borough of Bromley and North Somerset Council are the only two Local Authorities in England and Wales that are not members of the LGA. Recently a number of Councils have given notice of their withdrawal, however currently this is limited to approximately 10 Local Authorities.

Evidence gathered as a result of a telephone conversation with Mr John Hazeldine of London Borough of Bromley Council

The London Borough of Bromley took the decision to withdraw from the LGA at the end of 2002/03. The decision was taken as the Council did not consider that the LGA subscription provided good value for money and withdrawal consequently saved the Council in the region of £60,000.

Mr Hazeldine, the Head of Strategy at the time the decision was taken, advises that he considers that Bromley has not faced considerable disadvantage since its departure from the LGA. He cites the negative aspects to be as you would expect – those associated with not being a member of a large lobbying organisation, that Bromley does not receive important and useful intelligence from the LGA and is no longer part of wider policy development. Also, of course Bromley is not eligible to attend training events and briefings, which had proved useful in the past.

It is worth noting that Bromley is a member of the Association of London Councils, which is a think-tank and lobbying organisation that promotes the interests of London's 33 Councils. This association has filled some of the gap created when LGA membership ceased. I have investigated this a little further and found that other associations do exist outside of London, which you may already be aware of. For example, the Association of Councils of the Thames Valley Region comprises Councils in Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire and the Association of North East Councils represents all 12 strategic authorities in the North East region also exist to lobby Government.

Mr Hazeldine does not consider that Bromley's departure from the LGA has significantly affected the way in which the Council exercises its functions and represents its residents. The Council is still well informed and well represented. He also commented that much of the information available to LGA members is widely available on their public website, although the content is rather restricted.

Evidence gathered as a result of a telephone conversation with Mr Phil Hall, Director of Finance and Resources at North Somerset Council

North Somerset Council, a large unitary authority, gave notice of its intention to withdraw from the LGA in March 2007 and finally left the LGA at the end of 2007/08. The reason behind the withdrawal was financial, like the London

Borough of Bromley, North Somerset's subscription to the LGA was £60,000. The decision to cease its membership was taken by the Council when it was led by a Liberal Democrat / Labour Coalition, with no overall majority and was incorporated into the 2007/08 budget. After the May 2007 election, the Council became majority Conservative and it was anticipated that the Conservatives would want to withdraw their notice and remain a member. The Executive considered the issue and the decision was taken to invite the Deputy Chairman of the LGA to a meeting with Executive members in order to allow her the opportunity to convince members of the value of membership to North Somerset. Members requested further evidence that subsequently did not materialise and therefore took the decision to continue with the withdrawal.

It has taken some time for the Council to feel the real impact of the decision as emails and invitations to events continued beyond the Council's withdrawal, this came to an end on 1 April 2009 and was not seen as a major problem. Mr Hall considers that the lack of support from the LGA was most profoundly felt at the time of the Icelandic Banking Crisis. North Somerset Council was affected by this and could not benefit from the assistance of the LGA, which was co-ordinating the claims of its members.

North Somerset Council is an active member of 'South-West Councils', which aims to strengthen the local voice at regional and national levels. This has helped to lessen the impact of its withdrawal from the LGA and the Council has also learnt to network in other ways.

Scrutiny of South Norfolk Council's Membership of the LGA

Questions to Claire Holloway, LGA Lead Account Manager

Q1 What are the precise benefits of remaining a member of the LGA (and the Rural Commission)?

1. The LGA acts as the voice of local government in the national arena, lobbying and campaigning on behalf of its member councils. As a member of the LGA, South Norfolk District Council is part of a community of the 423 English & Welsh authorities who make up the Association.

Rural Commission

2. All councils in membership of the LGA are entitled to appoint up to two representatives to the Rural Commission. Membership of the Commission is included within South Norfolk's LGA subscription.
3. The Rural Commission provides a forum for member councils with an interest in rural affairs to raise and discuss issues of common concern and exchange good practice and experience. It ensures that the LGA take into account the needs, priorities and aspirations of rural authorities in formulating its policies, and contributes to the LGA's wider lobbying. Recent topics include:-

- ◆ Post Offices
- ◆ Housing and Planning
- ◆ Recession
- ◆ Influencing Manifestoes
- ◆ Broadband for rural areas.

4. The Commission meets twice a year - once in London and once alongside the Rural Conference (held in Cambridge this year and attended by delegates from South Norfolk). The September meeting included a ministerial address by Dan Norris, MP - Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at DeFRA.

Conference and Events

5. LGA Membership gives councils access to over 80 free or subsidised events each year, ranging from small seminars to large residential conferences. Member councils receive a 20% discount on residential events and 36% on one-day events.
6. So far this year, delegates from South Norfolk District Council have booked places on 8 LGA events.

Media

7. The LGA media team acts as the national media office for local government, rebutting many negative stories before they reach the national press, and preparing a robust defence to negative stories as they appear. The team provides advice and support to councils on dealing with the press – for example supporting South Norfolk's Communications Manager to respond to a recent FOI request from the Sunday Times.
8. The LGA media team seeks to raise the profile and reputation of local government, highlighting good practice by member authorities in our national press releases and media appearances. South Norfolk featured in a recent article on councils supporting pubs in rural areas.
9. The LGA weekly magazine *first* and electronic version *firstonline* has the highest circulation of any local government publication. The LGA website www.lga.gov.uk, keeps councillors and councils in touch with major issues affecting them, and shares best practice across local government, whilst an extensive programme of on the day briefings, press cuttings and alerts keep councils up to date with all emerging issues facing them.

Q2 Do you consider there to be any monetary benefits associated to remaining in the LGA?

10. The LGA has successfully lobbied for funding in a number of areas. Examples include

3 year funding settlement

11. Last Autumn we became concerned at council reports of reductions in income. We conducted a survey to obtain reliable evidence and, based on the findings, convinced government officials that cuts in local government's three year funding settlement would be immensely damaging to local communities. Following extensive lobbying from the LGA chairman and office holders, the government honoured the three year settlement and, although it has increased the efficiency target for 2010-11, is allowing councils to keep the cash, equal to around £600m in total. In South Norfolk's case, this prevented £173,824 from being cut from the third year of the funding settlement.

Council support to local residents

12. Conscious that the recession has led to an increase in requests for support from individuals and businesses, we lobbied hard for councils to be given additional resources to help local people in need. As a result the DWP increased the grant for Housing and Council Tax Benefits administration

twice - at Pre-Budget Report 2008 and Budget 2009. South Norfolk received an additional £62,418 and £41,612 as a result of our lobbying in this area.

Concessionary fares

13. We are in the middle of a protracted campaign to ensure that the funding arrangements do not leave councils out of pocket. On 4 November, as a result of our lobbying, DfT announced that they are consulting on a revised distribution of the £233m special grant funding for concessionary fares in 2010/11. The revised distribution would see South Norfolk's share of the funding increase from £220,000 to £450,000.

Q3 How does the membership fee represent good value for money for the Council and its residents?

14. South Norfolk District Council's annual subscription has been held at £13,485 for the third year running, which amounts to around 11 pence per resident per year. This figure represents a small proportion of the tangible cash benefit secured as a result of LGA lobbying set out in section 2 above.
15. In 2010/11, we plan to reduce subscriptions. Final details will be agreed by the LGA Executive in December.

Q3 What are the past achievements of the LGA - particularly those that would have benefited a small, rural District Council, such as ours?

16. Our most recent achievements include, but are not limited to, the following:

Land Charges

17. In summer, the Information Commissioner's Office directed councils to make property search information available free of charge under the Environmental Information Regulations. This has real cost implications for councils, and mean council taxpayers effectively subsidising the private businesses that access the information then sell it on.
18. Over several months, the LGA has worked with the Local Land Charges Institute to represent councils' interests on this issue. On behalf of our membership we have sought (and paid for at a cost of £60,000) a legal opinion that will be shared with all our members. The opinion is subject to legal privilege and cannot be shared with non LGA members, who will have to commission and pay for their own work.
19. South Norfolk's Land Charges manager attended an open meeting we held on 27 October for member authorities to discuss the issue of property

search information and the Environmental Information Regulations. We will continue to lead sector-wide work on this issue to try and find a solution.

Housing and planning

20. Our parliamentary lobbying made the government agree to water down powers to transfer planning functions from councils to the Homes and Communities Agency.

Sport and physical activity

21. We campaigned for the retention of locally-led funding arrangements. As a result, County Sports Partnerships like Active Norfolk have been retained and given targeted extra funding.

Future Jobs Fund

22. The LGA successfully lobbied for a job creation programme to help councils and their partners respond to the recession, and the particular growth in unemployment amongst 18-25 year olds. In the 2009 Budget the government announced a £1 billion Future Jobs Fund. In May, the LGA convened a one day conference with DWP and CLG to discuss the design with over 100 councils.
23. On 29 July, the first round of successful bids was announced, including £6.7 million to Norfolk County Council. The funding will benefit young people across the county, including in South Norfolk.

Business rates

24. We lobbied for small business rate relief to be given automatically, and persuaded the government to allow those businesses facing large rates increases at the end of transitional relief to spread the increase over three years.

Efficiency information

25. When Government decided that councils should include efficiency information on council tax bills at short notice, we lobbied to ensure that they were reimbursed for the costs.

Comprehensive Area Assessment

26. The LGA Improvement Board has worked to develop government's and regulators' confidence in the ability of local government to lead its own improvement. We have secured commitments from the Audit Commission and the Inspectorates that area assessment should focus on what is most important locally, that they will regularly share their emerging thinking with councils/partners, that they will engage elected members fully in the CAA process, and make use of councillor peers in providing advice on questions of local political and community leadership.

27. The Improvement Board has pressed repeatedly the need to ensure that CAA works properly in two-tier areas and the Inspectorates have committed to agreeing with councils in two tier areas how best to engage them in the process. The LGA is closely monitoring how CAA is being implemented with a view to influencing the process for Year 2.

Q4 Are there any significant risks the Council could face if it decided to withdraw from the LGA?

28. Councils not in membership lose access to all the LGA's support and services, both through our mainstream policy and media activities and through our four political group offices. This includes access to any support in the event of unexpected crises both locally or nationally.
29. Councils out of membership are not eligible for:-
- ◆ Membership of the General Assembly or any of the LGA Group's Boards, Panels, or committees, including the boards of the IDeA, LACORS, LGE or Local Partnerships
 - ◆ Membership of any of the Association's Urban or Rural Commissions or Special Interest Groups, including the new District Councils' Network
 - ◆ Access to briefings or alerts
 - ◆ Access to legal advice secured on behalf of member councils
30. From 2010, we will be limiting access to much of the information on the LGA's website to member councils only.

Q5 How many Councils have withdrawn from the LGA? Has this affected your lobbying-power with Government? If so, what are you doing to redress this?

31. Now more than ever, in the current financial climate, local government needs a strong collective voice. The strength of the LGA is that it represents almost every local authority, with only two out of 353 councils in England and Wales not in membership. Government is willing to listen and to negotiate with us, but loss of councils from membership weakens that power and reduces our influence.
32. Our Getting Closer programme is taking active steps to ensure we retain councils in membership by:-
- ◆ Broadening opportunities for councils to be actively involved in the work of the LGA

- ◆ Continuing to significantly reduce costs across the LGA Group (IDeA, LACORS, LGE, Local Partnerships and the Leadership Centre) in order to keep subscriptions low
- ◆ Developing a three year shared LGA Group business plan that focuses on those areas of concern to member councils where we can really make a difference
- ◆ Sharpening our offer to member councils and further restricting access to information for non members.

Claire Holloway
Corporate Programme Director
LGA

6 November 2009

Report from Councillor John Fuller, as the Council's Representative on the Local Government Association (LGA) General Assembly, on the LGA and his attendance at LGA events.

1. Background

- 1.1. I have attended a number of LGA events during the year. Two events in London when Leaders of all authorities are able to attend briefings with the LGA Chief Executive and secondly, the Annual LGA assemblies in Bournemouth [last year] and Harrogate this year.

2. Briefings

- 2.1. Referring to the briefings first of all. The value of these has been patchy but the one in October/November last year was really first class. We had a presentation from the LGA's Director of Finance who was able to update Councils on the ongoing Icelandic Banks situation. Interested Councils were able to share experiences and a 'Special Interest Group' was established but all councils had the opportunity to hear at first hand sensitive information that was not and still has not been made public. As the weeks passed, it became clear that, with £998m of public money at stake, the LGA's Group was very effectively campaigning within Government and, for those worst affected [eg Norfolk County & Breckland] special rules were developed to avoid council tax from soaring.

3. Conferences

- 3.1. Looking at the LGA conferences, taking the Bournemouth one first, members will recall that our Chief Executive at the time had just resigned and I was able to 'tap-up' a number of potential replacements to apply for the post. At that meeting I recruited the Ch Exec of EERA to the appointment and interview panel, which as it happens, was a very good thing.
- 3.2. At the conference, the National Group Meetings of all Leaders of Authorities is useful in determining a consistent national policy from all Conservative Councils. I'm sure that the other parties do likewise.
- 3.3. Briefings from our National Politicians as to the future direction of policy have been very helpful in determining our attitudes to development within the GNDP, for example. The LGA conference is one that is attended by nearly all Leaders and if it didn't exist, you'd have to invent it.
- 3.4. Moving on to Harrogate in July, Martin Wilby and myself attended as Sandra Dinneen was attending a reception in Downing Street. Although we were there for just 24 hours, we were able to have breakfast with the Leader of Lichfield Council, David Smith to discuss his approach to recycling and waste collection, something Lichfield are the leading Council on in the UK.
- 3.5. Later, we were able to have a briefing about emerging local Government and Conservative policy, particularly with respect to Council Tax and elected Police Commissioners, both issues which will affect us locally the latter issue impacting on our relationship with partners. Other authorities reports of shared-services are useful in ordering our thoughts on the matter.

- 3.6. In the evening I was able to meet with the Housing Minister John Healey and question him on infrastructure funding for the GNDP, prompting a letter reminding him of his predecessor's commitment to funding the Postwick Growth Hub that has the potential to deflect development from South Norfolk. At the same meeting I was able to quiz him on LGR and the Housing Revenue Account, where we have £1m of debt premia that are potentially at risk.
- 3.7. Additionally, we attended the EERA reception, where I was able to update the Chief Executive on our progress with the Long Stratton bypass, a project where he is taking a personal interest. I was able to speak to the LGA 'Account Manager' and Policy Director who confirmed her willingness to attend our Scrutiny Committee if required.
- 3.8. Naturally I was able to meet with other authorities including many from neighbouring Suffolk where we were able to discuss issues of common interest across the River Waveney.
- 3.9. I have not become active in any of the LGA national committees or taken any interest in 'The Employers Organisation', LACORS or other areas..

4. Conclusion

- 4.1. I do see value in the LGA subscription, even though I'm sure that it would be worth cutting the subs and cancelling the First magazine that drops through our letterbox every week.