

Scrutiny Panel Investigation of Annual Conference and General Assembly

Introduction

1. The Scrutiny Panel included in its work programme for 2003/4 an investigation into the function and content of the LGA Annual Conference. The study was subsequently extended to include the role and format of the General Assembly. The scrutiny was undertaken by a working group consisting of Cllrs Gordon Beever, Mrs Julia Peel, and Glen Sanderson, with Cllr Chris Townsend as chair.
2. The working group has met the Head of Commercial Services on two occasions for detailed discussions, and has interviewed three of the four LGA Group Leaders, and the Director of Central Services. It has also had access to the results of the telephone survey of 500 delegates to the last Annual Conference.
3. In undertaking this study, the working group recognised that the planning timescale for the Annual Conference was a long one and that any findings could only affect certain aspects for the next Conference in 2004. The Panel took the view that because of the complexity of the planning process for the Annual Conference and the wider political considerations of the role of the General Assembly, it would be preferable to present its findings not as a definitive set of recommendations for change, but as a number of issues for consideration by the Association.
4. The findings of the Panel are set out below for consideration by the LGA.

The Annual Conference

5. First, a few facts:
 - The 2003 Conference attracted 1298 delegates, the great majority of whom were elected members.
 - 60% of delegates had attended more than three annual conferences; but
 - 35% were first time attendees in 2003
 - 96% of attendees would come back again
 - the size of the conference and the number of delegates means that suitable venues are limited – suitability and cost is a major issue.
 - The long planning timescales means that any significant changes could not be made before the 2005 conference.

Is there a need for a Conference at all?

6. The Annual Conference is the largest function in the LGA calendar and is a major local government event. It is also a major undertaking in terms of expenditure and staff time – though it makes a significant contribution to the LGA budget – around £450,000 in 2003 (excluding staff costs). So it is important that the LGA is satisfied that the reasons for holding the Conference are justifiable, and not just a case of repeating something that has always been done. There is a large degree of consensus amongst senior members and officers on the benefits of the Conference, as set out below:
 - A vehicle for LGA message
 - Networking and engaging membership, particularly new leaders
 - Strengthened party links
 - Opportunity for major meeting of Party Groups
 - A significant contribution to the LGA budget
 - Most membership organisations have them
 - Those who attend are basically satisfied
7. The first four points are unsurprising given that the LGA is essentially a lobbying organisation operating in an essentially political environment. It also reflects its membership body role. The contribution to the LGA budget is not lightly to be dismissed, and could have implications for the acceptance of any proposals to widen the delegate diversity.
8. Whilst the fact that most membership organisations hold similar events is not in itself a clinching reason for the LGA to hold one, nevertheless, the continuing popularity of such events across the spectrum of organisations suggests that there are still perceived benefits.
9. The fact that the recent survey revealed that most delegates were satisfied with the conference should be a source of satisfaction to the LGA and its conference organisers, but begs the question as to whether the delegate profile is appropriate – is the conference attracting a sufficiently broad spectrum of local government people? Questions of member engagement and diversity are addressed later in the report.

Is the structure and length of the Conference right?

10. A number of issues have been highlighted both by the survey and interviews:

Plenary v smaller sessions

11. Plenary sessions are traditional features of most conferences. In the LGA context, plenary sessions with major national politicians are seen as a draw, and are well

attended. However, it is always difficult to secure the attendance of the most senior Government politicians (Prime Minister; Chancellor) but ministers with responsibility for local government will normally attend. Opposition party leaders similarly cannot be guaranteed. Even where senior politician attendance is planned, it can be subject to last minute amendment, which can disrupt the conference timetable. Nevertheless, despite the operational difficulties, the attendance of senior national politicians is seen as an integral part of the conference – and is expected by delegates.

12. **Experience and delegate responses suggest, however, that other plenary sessions - not involving senior national politicians - are seen as less successful, or popular.** Such sessions have been typified by lower attendance by delegates, which is exaggerated by the size of the main auditorium. As a result, there is often little debate following the speaker's address. This may be due to the size of the auditorium being a disincentive to ordinary delegates to participate, in turn exacerbated by small audiences.
13. **By contrast, smaller workshop sessions appear more popular.** They have also been a feature of the annual conference and have grown in number in recent years. Their smaller size appears better able to encourage debate amongst participants, probably due to the less inhibiting size of the accommodation. By their nature, the subjects of workshop sessions are more focussed and specialised, and it may be that delegates choosing to attend do so because of their interest in the subject matter and, often their own specialised knowledge.
14. The LGA has now moved to an annual business plan with a range of policy projects overseen by members. This approach might enable more smaller sessions to focus on aspects of the business plan, including providing an opportunity for individual or groups of authorities to “show case” innovative work in support of business plan projects.

Party - based events

15. The conference programme traditionally includes party social events, such as receptions and dinners. These are always popular, and help the development of party cohesion and liaison. However, the more policy-based sessions have been cross party, which is understandable for a multiparty organisation. However, evidence from group leaders suggests that there may be scope for an increase in party political events under the conference umbrella, enabling single party debates to take place at specific times. **The Association should consider an expansion of single party based events from social occasions into more policy- orientated sessions at certain points in the conference programme.**

Networking time

16. The popularity of party based events, and the continued support for the party group meetings before the General Assembly may be partly due to the expectation of delegates to be able to network with fellow delegates outside the formal conference sessions. The temptation of conference organisers is to fill the programme with a variety of sessions throughout the period. **They should not overlook the need for the programme not to be so crowded that networking time is crowded out, or only achieved by delegates by missing formal sessions.** It is a difficult balance, but one which should not err too exclusively on the formal programme.

The Length of the Conference

17. The conference proper has in the past lasted three days (Wednesday to Friday), but proceeded on the Tuesday by the Annual meeting of the General Assembly and the party group meetings associated with it. Is this too long?
18. It has been argued that 4 –5 days is now too much of a time commitment, particularly for senior members of authorities with ever – increasing pressures in running their authorities. This issue is difficult to judge as delegate numbers seem to suggest that many members are able to commit the time. **However, there is scope for the way in which the conference is organised and delegate rates are arranged to enable potential attendees to be more selective of the period of time which they attend the conference.** This issue is strongly linked with the issue of delegate diversity which is addressed next.

Should there be more delegate diversity?

19. From the survey, it appears that 35% of delegates each year are new attendees. On the face of it this appears a good result in terms of attracting new faces to the event, particularly with the finding that over 90% of delegates were happy with the event.
20. But a further question is whether the audience is too leader orientated? Might the 35% new delegates be largely new leaders? Should greater efforts be made to attract backbenchers and other under – represented local government groups, such as younger or ethnic minority councillors? Some smaller authorities also apparently find it difficult to send delegates to the Conference. Group leaders in their evidence saw it as important that senior local authority members attended, but were supportive of efforts to have greater participation.
21. Whilst this is often a matter of judgement as to the most appropriate balance amongst target audiences, **the Panel is of the view that the Association should give serious consideration to attracting delegates from amongst the local government constituency beyond the level of leaders.**

22. The Panel has heard of the initiatives begun at the 2003 conference to attract a wider audience, particularly:
- The introduction of a day rate to encourage single day attendance
 - The development of a conference within a conference at a specific part of the programme to target different audiences
23. **These developments are welcome and should be further explored and assessed to identify whether they have had an effect. If they are effective, they should be developed for subsequent conferences.**
24. The LGA should examine the marketing of these new approaches, especially the day rate approach, as it is essential that the local authority audience, from whose ranks backbench and young councillors would be drawn, is aware of them. **As part of this marketing approach, the LGA should consider whether it might encourage a wider delegate composition by drawing attention of authorities to the day rates and elements of the programme which might attract specific audiences.**
25. **For future years, the LGA should give serious consideration to the development of a system of subsidies for under – represented councillor groups.** Whilst it is understood that the Conference makes a significant contribution to the LGA budget, it is worth examining whether a proportion of this income could be foregone to encourage greater delegate diversity, either through a subsidy aimed at categories of councillors as individuals; or as a differential rate for smaller authorities.

Linkages with Annual Meeting of General Assembly

26. It has been suggested that the Annual Meeting of the General Assembly on the day before the conference may affect the composition of delegations to the conference, because the allocation of voting rights at the Annual Meeting will normally go to senior members who will then go on to attend the conference. As a result, the close linkage of the Annual Meeting with the conference may be a significant barrier to greater delegate diversity.
27. One suggested approach, beyond the differentiated targeting suggested above (through day rates etc) was the separation of the Annual Meeting from the Conference, which is dealt with in the next section.

The General Assembly

28. Details of the role of the General Assembly under the LGA Constitution are attached in the annex. Formal responsibilities are relatively few in number, primarily related to the appointment of office holders; setting a budget and subscriptions; and overseeing the constitution. The twice-yearly meetings of the General Assembly are preceded by party group meetings. Meetings have also provided a forum for debate through motions submitted by member authorities (though this is not required by the constitution).
29. A major issue considered by the Panel has been a significant fall off in attendance at recent General Assembly meetings.

Why might attendances be declining?

30. The consensus of opinion is that the debates in the meetings were not engaging to representatives. The reasons for this partly mirror the lack of popularity of the plenary sessions at the Annual Conference – the forum was seen as too large and intimidating for many councillors.
31. Another reason more particular to the General Assembly was that the debates were seen as too “managed”. Rather than the cut and thrust of political debate which is more a feature of local party politics, the LGA has sought to achieve a consensual, multiparty approach more fitting to its role as the voice of local government. As a result, debates on motions have tended to seek an agreed approach rather than a debate.
32. An alternative approach would be to separate debates from the formal business of the General Assembly, providing an opportunity for a number of debates in smaller forums, and leaving the constitutional business to the formal meeting. The experiment at the December meeting of 4 separate debate sessions has proved more popular, and is being tried again at the July 2004 meeting.

Group meetings

33. In contrast with declining attendances at the General Assembly proper, the preceding Group meetings remain popular. They usually attract high profile party speakers; and are able to hold less constrained debates. Group Leaders were firmly of the view that they wanted 2 group meetings per year but not all necessarily saw the benefit of two Assembly meetings per year.

Why two meetings per year?

34. Whilst the constitution does not specify two meetings, it appears likely that they were originally instituted as a means of getting together the much larger membership of the newly established LGA. There are now practical administrative requirements for setting

the budget and agreeing subscriptions which make two meetings convenient and, over time, Groups have grown to appreciate two opportunities to meet at political level.

Issues for consideration

The format of the General Assembly

35. It is suggested that the inclusion of formal motions for debate by the whole assembly have not proved successful, and **that the experiment of the separation of debates from the formal, constitutional business of the General Assembly should be continued in future meetings.**

The Timing of the Annual Meeting

36. The Association is required to hold an Annual meeting once a year to address core constitutional issues, such as the appointment of office holders. The Association needs to consider when this meeting is held.
37. If, as at present, it is held at the beginning of the Annual Conference in July, then account needs to be taken of its affect on the diversity of delegates attending the Conference.
38. An alternative date in the middle of the year separated from the Annual Meeting has complications. If it is brought forward into June, member authorities will have less time to appoint representatives to the General Assembly, particularly in election years. If the date is put back to September, there will be a delay of 3 – 4 months between the elections and the election of LGA office holders; and the national party conference season starts at the end of the month.
39. **On balance, the view of the Panel is that the Annual meeting may need to continue to be linked to the week of the Annual Conference, and that questions of delegate diversity need to be addressed through the other means referred to earlier.**

The number of meetings

40. **The Panel did not come to a definitive view as to whether there ought to be one or two meetings of the General Assembly. However, the Panel suggests that the LGA Executive, when addressing this issue, should take the following factors into account.**

A single meeting: If only an Annual Meeting was held, (as required by the constitution), (whether in June, July or September), there would be an issue of setting subscriptions, which have up to now been agreed in December, in the period immediately before local authorities' budget setting. If there was not a General Assembly in December, consideration would need to be given to either:

- Delegating authority to the LGA Executive to set subscriptions.

One objection to this approach would be that member authorities would not get an opportunity to debate the proposed subscription levels in a formal meeting.

- Adopt a different accounting year

It would be possible for the LGA accounting year to run from 1 January. However, both some members and the officers interviewed were not supportive of this suggestion, as it would put the LGA out of line with the accounting year of its member authorities; and would be a potentially disruptive organisational move.

Two meetings: There appeared to the Panel to be two main options:

- One annual meeting in the summer to address core constitutional issues (office holders, etc) followed by a meeting in December but with separate debates (as last December); or
- In recognition of the value political groups attached to the opportunity to meet twice a year, a non – Assembly session of debates for delegates from all member authorities, preceded by Group meetings held towards end of year. This option would be dependent on a satisfactory solution to setting annual subscriptions mentioned above.