

Safer & Stronger Communities Board – report from Councillor Ann Lucas OBE (Chair)

Rewiring Licensing

1. Rewiring Licensing was recognised in the Autumn Statement, with Government committing to the introduction of a simplified, single application process. Our media work welcomed this response to our proposals, but called on Government departments to go further. Cllr Tony Page, also presented Rewiring Licensing at a conference for the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health; highlighting the inclusion of its core aspects in the Autumn Statement.

Gambling / Betting Commission

2. Cllr Page set out our call for councils to have greater control over betting shops. This followed the Smith Commission proposal for additional powers on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals to be given to Scotland, as part of the wider devolution package.
3. Although we believe that the existing legislative framework in this area should be amended, we have been working closely with the betting shop industry through the LGA Betting Commission to discuss ways in which councils and firms can work together. A framework agreement agreed by the Commission was formally launched at our Annual Licensing Conference on 15 January.

Reducing the Strength

4. The LGA has published guidance for councils wishing to introduce a 'Reduce the Strength' campaign, which works with retailers to remove high strength alcohol from the shelves. A number of councils have developed schemes and, although locally successful, these schemes have faced significant legal challenge from the alcohol industry. This guidance sets out how councils can support participating retailers to stay on the right side of competition law.

Annual Licensing Conference

5. Cllr Joanna Spicer chaired the annual licensing conference on 15 January, with Cllr Tony Page providing an update on our successful Rewiring Licensing campaign, which was launched at last year's conference. In addition to launching the two new documents – the LGA's Reducing the Strength Guidance, and the LGA's Betting Framework – over 70 delegates heard about key issues facing licensing teams, including challenges to fee-setting, changes to deregulation of entertainment, and the Government's alcohol strategy. Best practice was shared from a number of councils, including Lambeth's community engagement, Manchester and Nottingham's alcohol strategy work, and public health engagement in licensing.

Annual Safer Communities Conference

6. I chaired the annual Safer Communities conference, which was themed around 'what works' in crime reduction. We heard from Professor Nick Tilley from UCL, and the Early Intervention Foundation on what has been rigorously assessed as reducing crime. There were other contributions from the College of Policing and Hertfordshire County Council on the role of public health in reducing crime, from Portsmouth City Council on their restructure of the way they deliver community safety services, and from Derbyshire County Council on tackling gangs and serious youth violence.

Inside Government conference on ASB

7. I gave a keynote speech at the Inside Government conference on tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) and talked about the need for multi-agency approaches when it comes to reducing ASB, the need for close partnership working to make the best use of the new tools and powers available under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, the importance of pooling budgets between local agencies and intervening early to prevent people being drawn into a life of crime and disorder.

National Group on Sexual Violence Against Children and Vulnerable Adults

8. The Board represented the LGA at the meeting of the Home Office's National Group on Sexual Violence Against Children and Vulnerable Adults. The meeting considered the work being undertaken across government following publication of the Jay Report into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham. There was also a discussion of the National Group's work plan; including how there could be wider local government involvement through such organisations such as SOLACE, ADCS and ADASS. The importance of involving these bodies in the National Group's work was raised by the LGA.

Criminal Justice Council

9. In October Cllr Spicer attended the Criminal Justice Council, which is chaired by Lord Justice Gross. The Council discussed work in the criminal justice system to encourage early guilty pleas from defendants in particular in Magistrates' courts, whether the number of unrepresented defendants was increasing in Magistrates and Crown Courts, and the review by Sir Brian Leveson of criminal court practice and procedure to reduce the number of hearings and increase the use of technology. Cllr Spicer questioned whether councils had been consulted on the changes to procedures and the Ministry of Justice sought information on how frequently councils brought criminal cases in either the Magistrates or Crown Courts, which has now been supplied.

PCP event

10. The Board ran an event for police and crime panel members and the officers supporting them in November. The event heard from the Home Office about how they wished to engage with panels. Delegates also heard from the chairs of the West Midlands, South Yorkshire and Kent panels about their experiences with scrutiny of police and crime commissioners (PCCs) including around child sexual exploitation, and how two panels had dealt with issues arising from the death in office of a PCC and the resignation of a PCC. There were member and officer themed discussions around the support available to panels, the handling of complaints and whether panels needed additional powers. The discussions helped inform the LGA's response to the inquiry by the Committee on Standards in Public Life into police accountability, leadership and ethics.

FGM

11. At the start of December, Cllr Lisa Brett met Baroness Williams of Trafford, and Ministry of Justice officials to discuss the LGA's amendment to the Serious Crime Bill which would make it an offence to promote or encourage FGM. Also at the meeting were Baroness Meacher, who had tabled the LGA amendment to the Bill, and Mr Dexter Dias QC a human rights barrister with an interest in tackling FGM. Cllr Brett explained why the LGA had sought to move the amendment and outlined the social pressure that can be placed on parents to have their daughters cut, and how the amendment was designed to reduce some of this pressure. Baroness Williams and the Ministry of Justice officials indicated that if evidence could be provided that there were people in the UK promoting FGM, and from people in communities where FGM is practised of the benefit of the amendment then the government would consider the LGA's amendment further.

Anti-Social, Crime and Policing Act workshops

12. Cllr Anita Lower chaired two regional workshops for local authorities on the new tools and powers for tackling ASB, which came into effect on 20 October. The workshops provided delegates with an opportunity to hear about how different areas are using the new tools and powers, and then discuss how they might be used to tackle a range of issues that councils and their partners commonly come across. The events also highlighted some technical issues that councils are struggling with and which the LGA has taken up with the Home Office.

APCC National Partnership Summit

13. The Association of Police and Crime Commissioners held their National Partnership Summit in mid-November. Cllr Lower was invited to speak at a session on the implementation of the community trigger. This new process for dealing with complaints about a lack of response from councils, the police and other partners to incidents of ASB was introduced as part of the changes resulting from the Anti-Social, Crime and Policing Act. Cllr Lower talked about the implementation of the trigger provision, some of the issues local areas had had to deal with in setting it up and the importance of police and local authority collaboration to tackle ASB.

Lyn Brown MP

14. On 25 November Cllr Jeremy Hilton, Chair of the Fire Services Management Committee, and Cllr David Acton and Cllr Kay Hammond met with Lyn Brown MP, the shadow fire minister. They discussed Lyn Brown's advocacy of a national fire service to meet funding challenges as well as sector-led improvement; the progress of the sector in co-responding and collaboration; a statutory duty for flooding and pensions. Subsequently a letter from all lead members was sent to Lyn Brown providing further information.

Clive Betts MP

15. On 3 December Cllrs Hilton, Acton and Hammond held a very positive meeting with Clive Betts MP, Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, to discuss key issues facing the fire and rescue sector, including the Adrian Thomas review of firefighter terms and conditions and the sector's response to the Knight Review. Members highlighted the value that Fire and Rescue Authorities place in the peer review process and stressed the need for more local flexibilities to allow for closer working with other blue light services. In response, Clive expressed an interest in seeing examples of interoperability in action and getting a better understanding of the barriers to additional joint working which the LGA has now sent through.

Contact officer: Helen Murray
Position: Head of Programmes
Phone no: 020 7664 3266
Email: helen.murray@local.gov.uk