



Briefing 21-43

October 2021

## **Roundup of the APSE Annual Seminar 2021**

**To:** All Chief Executives, Senior Policy Officers Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### **Introduction**

For APSE members unable to attend this year's Annual Seminar we have put together a summary that captures the two-day programme of presentations, workshops and discussions on delivering for local people and local economies.

Given the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic we were delighted to finally deliver a major in-person seminar returning to the city of Birmingham where we had originally planned our scheduled seminar for 2020. The key providers of local services gathered for two days of workshops, networking and expert insight into the latest policy, technological and legislative developments in the sector and perhaps most appropriately in the home of Joseph Chamberlain.

This briefing therefore provides an overview of this very special (and COVID-secure) event.

### **A symposium of ideas**

APSE's outgoing National Chair Cllr Mark Pengelly, opened the Seminar - our first face-to-face seminar since the onset of the pandemic - with a symposium on ideas and, in particular, a focus on 'Local by Default', the recently launched 116-page final report of the APSE Local Government Commission 2030 (ALGC2030). APSE was delighted to be joined by Cllr Brigid Jones, Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council, who invoked the memory of the great municipalist and former Mayor of Birmingham Joseph Chamberlain when she spoke of harnessing the dynamism within the sector to build back better. Having highly commended the Commission report,

Cllr Jones then wished the hundreds of delegates, exhibitors and speakers in attendance a productive seminar within her wonderful city.

The small issue of the long-term future of local government was the topic of our next speaker, Paul O'Brien, APSE Chief Executive and Chair of the ALGC2030. Offering a brief summary of each chapter of 'Local by Default', Paul was especially keen to highlight the growing public policy crises impacting the UK, the dysfunctional relationship that exists between central government and councils, and the need to enshrine local governments role constitutionally to ensure that the many challenges faced by local communities can be met effectively. Paul called for current and future governments to endorse a principle of local by default. *"At present, the boundaries between the roles and responsibilities of the different spheres of government are blurred and lack clarity. Adopting a principle of local by default reverses this dynamic, building forward from the local and embedding collaboration across different parts of government."*

The next commissioner to take to the podium was Lord Gary Porter CBE, Leader of South Holland District Council and now non-executive director to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Gary talked through the report's recommendations on how we revitalise local government, and how we protect and empower local councils. *"Councils do not need centrally- prescribed managerial models, and that flexibility and innovation will be better facilitated if prescriptions are put to one side and councils left to determine their organisational structure and locally appropriate mixes of delivery models."*

Our final Commissioner to speak in Session 1 – Elma Murray OBE, Interim Chair of the Accounts Commission for Audit Scotland 2020-2023 and former Chief Executive of North Ayrshire Council – spoke of the importance of the 5 P's that have to be front-of-mind if we are to ensure a diverse, inclusive and representative local government: People, Partnership, Prevention, Performance, and Place. *"Local authorities as stewards of place can work to address the inequalities that risk fracturing our diverse communities. Strategic interventions in the foundational and caring economy will be essential as we move towards post-Covid recovery."*



*Cllr Brigid Jones opens the APSE Annual Seminar in Birmingham.*

## **Reinvigorating organisational leadership post COVID: Special Guest Speaker Kris Akabusi MBE**

“We see you”. Those three words, directed towards the various officers and councillors from across the UK that made up the audience, formed the motif of our next session. Three-time Olympic medallist and European, Commonwealth and World Champion, Kris Akabusi MBE, delivered an inspirational talk weaving his incredible achievements on the track with the phenomenal achievements of local government throughout the pandemic in keeping the country on track. Kris reminded everyone in local government of the tremendous legacy they were leaving, and why they should be immensely proud of the maintained parks, collected bins and meals delivered during this time of national crisis.



*Dreaming big with Kris Akabusi: Lessons on how local government can overcome its hurdles.*

## Sustainable and Greener Local Neighbourhood Services

The focus of session two was the key role being played by local authority frontline services in mitigating the impact of climate change and driving the green agenda forward. First up was Paul Bellotti, Director of Communities and Environment at APSE Overall Council of the Year 2020 East Riding of Yorkshire Council. From route optimisation to dedicated town, beach and village task force teams, Paul spoke of the many ways service providers can get it right at a neighbourhood level and win the trust of local residents.



*Cllr Andrea Lewis, Deputy Leader of Swansea Council, introduces the session two panel*

Rosa Tanfield, Neighbourhood Council Group Services Manager at Colchester Council, was up next to talk climate action. Amongst a whole range of exciting green initiatives being implemented by Rosa and her team, one particularly eye-catching scheme is the Colchester Woodland and Biodiversity Project: A unique opportunity for everyone to work together and develop a legacy of a greener Borough.

Our final speaker of the session was Glynn Humphries, Corporate Director Communities, Environment and Climate Change at Wakefield Council. In the wake of climate emergency declarations and continuing green policy announcements by central government, Glynn spoke about the difficulties this can present for frontline services. Glynn spoke about the practical action his council has taken thus far and rounded off by talking about the importance of the APSE network in helping to turn climate proposals into meaningful action.

## Variations on a theme: ensuring excellence in service delivery

Day one was capped off with thematic forums in which delegates could opt for one of three highly interactive sessions. Forum 1 looked at climate change and the ecological emergency, and featured Patrick Allcorn, Head of Local Energy at BEIS, discussing progress on the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution and the various funding available to local authorities. Patrick was joined by Head of APSE Training, Fiona Sutton-Wilson, who spoke of the necessity of a carbon literate workforce if the sector is to address the climate crisis effectively.

Forum 2 shone a spotlight on place-making, neighbourhoods, high streets, and housing. Alongside APSE's Mo Baines, we were delighted to be joined by Samantha Dennis, Director of Public Protection and Streetpride at Derby City Council. Following Derby's bid to become UK City of Culture 2025, Samantha helped facilitate discussion on how councils can act as stewards of place and engender a sense of civic pride; something that will be incredibly important as we move into the recovery phase of the pandemic.



*Patrick Allcorn, Head of Local Energy at BEIS, facilitates the discussion in Forum 1.*

Over in Forum 3, Charlotte Paine, Head of Environmental and Operational Services at South Holland District Council, discussed lessons from COVID, particularly the impact of the pandemic on operational delivery of waste management services. Charlotte was joined by Head of APSE Performance Networks Debbie Johns, who made the point that *it's never been more crucial to collect data to understand fully the impact and consequences of COVID-19, and how this has impacted on resources and performance across council services.*

## Finance, commercialisation and investing in housing

Chaired by outgoing National Secretary Karen Bradford, the first panel of day two considered the thorny issue of local government funding (or lack thereof). First up to the podium was Jon Collins, ALGC2030 Commissioner and former leader of Nottingham City Council, making the case for establishing a sustainable financial settlement for local government. *"Using a percentage of GDP as a proxy measure for the minimal threshold below which local government funding cannot fall is an imperfect mechanism, but one which may nevertheless help to ensure that local government cannot bear again its unfair share of the brunt of austerity."*

Continuing the plenary theme on commercialisation the seminar considered the question *'What lessons can councils learn from a LATCo?* Thankfully Steve Wilson, Director of Collaboration and Development and Seminar sponsor Commercial Services Group, was in Birmingham to talk delegates through the many ways his team have helped councils across the UK, expand their thinking, improve their performance and deliver long-lasting benefits to their local communities.



*Steve Wilson of Commercial Service Group takes to the podium*

Our final speaker of the session – Fiona Howie, Chief Executive of the Town and Country Planning Association – asked what the future holds for councils following changes to planning. Fiona also went on to discuss the findings of APSE and the TCPA's latest research: Bystanders or innovators? How local authorities can use place making to drive the green recovery. *"Councils can either accept the status quo, which means being part of an increasingly passive local public sector, reliant on limited private investment and focused on using the limited regulatory powers at its disposal or they can seize the initiative by being more directly involved in shaping the future of their places and communities."*

## Leader

Moving onto Session 5 – chaired by the newly elected APSE National Chair Cllr Arwyn Woolcock - delegates were treated to an hour of ideas on how to futureproof local government services. Getting us underway, we were delighted to be joined by APSE Local Government Commissioner and former Head of Local Government, Police and Justice at Unison, Heather Wakefield. Heather drew attention to the importance of establishing new skills and capability career pathways into local government, training and career development for existing employees, with particular urgency for pathways in climate change mitigation, digitalisation and the care economy. *“Policy agendas and decisions that truly reflect the diverse needs of communities are more likely to stem from having the presence of people of all backgrounds and genders in top posts and frontline service delivery.”*

Derek McCallan, Chief Executive of NILGA, was next to take to the podium to discuss the UK’s exit from the EU and the implications for local government in Northern Ireland. Derek provided the example of the industrial estate Flurrybridge, which sits on the border, and presents a number of logistical and servicing challenges that local councils and local government networks - like APSE and NILGA - will have to think smart to overcome.

It was a professor amongst the professionals with our final speaker of the Session, as Steve Griggs of De Montfort University joined us for a lively discussion on the changing role of chief officers and senior leadership teams. Drawing on the findings of the APSE Local Government Commission, Professor Griggs asked how are we going to react, regulate, resource and develop a workforce of tomorrow once we take into account the broader responsibility of chief officers and the declining numbers of staff employed by local councils.



*Professor Steve Griggs discusses the findings of the APSE Local Government Commission 2030*

## **Leadership Networks**

Our penultimate session of the day was a workshop session which involved five specially operationally focused hubs. These networks looked at innovation, the latest industry developments and technologies; with a strong focus on how others are improving their operational frontline services.

## **Public attitudes and the pandemic**

The two-day Seminar rounded off with an audience with renowned psephologist and leading authority on British polling and elections, Professor John Curtice. A mainstay on our television screens on any election night, Professor Curtice delivered a presentation on the latest research on public attitudes to welfare and public services in the midst of the pandemic. APSE Communications Officer Matt Ellis gives an overview of the research findings on in Briefing 21-44

**Matthew Ellis**

**APSE Communications Officer**

[Highlights reels of both day one and two of the Seminar, as well as a full recording of Professor Curtice's presentation, are available to watch here.](#)