

Colleagues,

It is my great honour to accept the role of APSE National Chair for 2025-2026.

It would of course be remiss of me not to thank my dear colleague and friend Archie for his sterling leadership over the past year. Archie has steered APSE over the development of a new trading company which we are immensely proud of as well as some serious legal issues and doing so whilst battling a serious threat to his own health. Of course, Archie could not have achieved these outcomes without the support of Andrew Kennedy as our National Secretary for the past year. I think it is fair to say they have been our 'A Team'.

I would also like to thank the wonderful Anita Brown for so kindly agreeing to act as my National Secretary for the coming year.

Colleagues we know that the coming year means further challenges for APSE and of course our local government family so tonight I want to set out to you my ambitions and programme of action for my year in office.

For those of you who know me you will be aware that I am passionate about education and skills, and how we can support our young people and our local economies. In fact, I am enormously proud that in my own council, South Tyneside for its work in this area. We now have the spades in the ground to start work on the relocation of South Tyneside College and South Shields Marine School, not only providing new regional skills opportunities but also supporting the regeneration of South Shields town centre.

Of course, skills will be needed if local government is tasked with the delivery of 1.5 million new homes. From planning to plumbers without a serious investment in the skills needed to build our new homes those homes will remain a pipe dream. We must not let hard working families down – I therefore want APSE's housing network to be laser focussed on the skills to deliver those new homes.

My commitment to the skills agenda is also why I am excited by the opportunities for APSE member councils presented by the devolution agenda. The English Devolution Bill provides an opportunity for collaboration between strategic, sub-regional and regional, collaboration on skills, transport, health and wellbeing alongside local economic growth - however we must ensure that this is not done 'to' local government but done 'with' local government.

I am also mindful that this should not be an Anglo-centric agenda. There is a compelling case for greater devolution and strategic level working in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and I will be working with my colleagues across the UK to explore what actions can be taken by APSE in furtherance of these aims.

Of course, for our colleagues in England we face the prospect of reorganisation into Unitary authorities. A process already experienced by our colleagues in Scotland, Wales and in Northern Ireland with the overall reduction in councils experienced in the last decade. My pledge to you is to ensure that APSE will support those member councils facing the disruption and uncertainty of reorganisation and it is one of the reasons at tonight's AGM we will formally establish our LGR network to support the transition to new Unitary status – most importantly ensuring that those charged with delivering our frontline neighbourhood services are best supported to deliver from day one. We will be drawing upon the lessons learned from our colleagues across the UK.

Of course, one of the supposed drivers for LGR is efficiencies which leads me to the vexed issue of fair funding. Whilst I am sure many of us will welcome the commitments made to improve local government finance and the introduction of multi-year settlements the issue of fair funding is far from settled. The new formulae set out in the most recent announcements has not created the outcomes intended and I for one will be asking APSE to continue to represent the interests of our member councils in calling for a smoothing approach to ensure councils are able to fairly adapt to changes and for the formulae to be revisited.

We will also be watching the Casey review with interest – whilst I fully appreciate that the funding dynamics of social care the delay in achieving tangible outcomes in how we fund our care services is incredibly difficult to reconcile with the pressures on council budgets.

I am sure that everyone in this room will appreciate that whilst funding pressures continue in social care, we risk the very fabric of our neighbourhood services. For too long the funding of our parks, leisure centres, highways, school meals, waste and recycling and streetscene services have been the low-hanging fruit when it comes to budget cuts. We must continue with the focus in APSE's current business plan on restoring the value of our neighbourhood services. A theme I will continue as I support APSE in the development of its next business plan for 2026-2029.

Of course, our neighbourhoods and communities have been under pressure in the last few months- indeed from the summer of July 2024 to the present day we are increasingly seeing fractious debates and protests, which are sometimes sadly turning to violence. Community cohesion must not be allowed to deteriorate. There are sensitive issues and across our society people have a right to be heard and for their concerns to be addressed.

However, we all have a duty, as leaders within our local communities, to ensure that debates are informed by facts not fiction and to raise the level of debate, avoiding hysteria and the 'othering' of individuals and groups in our society. My pledge to you is to lead a piece of research on cohesion and best practice – we need to ensure kindest and integrity in public life – that means ensuring we make space for sensible informed debate within our communities.

Finally, I am proud of APSE's history of extensive engagement on environmental sustainability. This tradition of policy into action continues as we support our member councils on sustainability and biodiversity – from grassland management through to rewilding cemeteries and of course our annual allotments survey. At a higher level we will continue our work on ensuring new homes are insulated and address fuel poverty, and for our local authority assets we will push the case for investment to reduce energy costs, including through transitioning to greener and cheaper energy supplies.

So, there you go folks – a busy year ahead but I repeat I am absolutely honoured to be your chair – a tough act to follow from our dear Archie but I will be doing my very best to fly the flag for our wonderful member councils – including all of you here tonight.

Thank you again for your support!

Cllr Tracey Dixon, APSE National Chair