

## improvement express october 2007

Welcome to *Improvement Express*

As the party conference season draws to a close, it is difficult to avoid speculation about the timing of a general election. This could as easily affect the announcement of CSR07, but there must be greater concern about the impact of the local government bill. In the meantime, I am sure we are all getting on with the job in hand.

The renewed Chief Executives' task force convened by the LGA met for the first time earlier this month to consider a new phase of sector-led improvement and efficiency. CSR07 provides the context: central government will be demanding greater efficiency from the sector. And, however unfairly, this plays to many negative public preconceptions about councils.

As the impact of CSR reaches individual councils, we recognise that many councils have had to make hard choices already and many more will have to do so. CLG and LGA, with input from the IDeA, are drafting the improvement and efficiency strategy, which will describe a framework for support to councils as part of the CSR settlement.

The intention is already clear however – to devolve more control over improvement services to regional level and ensure that regional improvement partnerships become the first port of call for councils.

There is still debate over the extent that the strategy will define the roles of the improvement bodies, including the IDeA. Our view is that it would be inappropriate for too much detail to be centrally determined, when the point of devolving responsibility is to allow priorities to be defined locally. This will mean that the IDeA needs to be prepared to operate in a radically different way. For one thing, we will be working with nine commissioning bodies with a strong sense of what is needed in their region.

I think of the IDeA as a 'national spine' of support services and development programmes, with the capacity to operate at regional and local level. We will certainly continue to provide services directly to individual councils. But our relationship with the regional improvement partnerships will be more important as they become increasingly significant players in the improvement world.

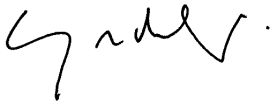
The Best commission called for an enhanced role for regional associates, and we are looking at the best mix of regional working and national coordination. So to develop the national spine analogy, the IDeA is adopting a flexible posture so we can respond to the changing needs of RIPs.



Many of the approaches that will enable improvement support to develop as a genuinely local/regional/national approach are already familiar – Beacons, IDeA Knowledge, accredited peers who ensures that councils can learn from others' experience. But we are also ensuring we have the capacity to help RIPs increase their leverage, while recognising that some improvement support requires a national perspective.

The recently announced Local Government Delivery Council will enable a sector-led approach to transforming services in order to respond to the twin pressures of reduced budgets and rising demand. If tough times lie ahead, it will be critical that the sector deploys its own resources to enable service transformation.

Best wishes



**Lucy de Groot** *Executive Director*

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Your feedback on the IDeA's *Improvement Express* is very welcome. If you would like to comment, please contact the IDeA's Head of Communications and Marketing, **Eddie Gibb**, by telephone on **020 7296 6770**, or email **eddie.gibb@idea.gov.uk**.



## stronger political leadership

### preparing for the new unitaries

Councils contemplating local government reorganisation have an opportunity to learn from the 'if onlys' of the people who went through the process last time round. The learning is collected in a new booklet called **Gearing Up for Change**.

'If only we'd given more focus to having dedicated capacity for key things rather than getting too many people involved in the whole process,' said one officer. 'If only we'd looked at the long-term and been more hard-nosed as leaders about some of the assets we took over,' added a member.

The guide shares tips on setting out a vision, ensuring effective leadership, providing clarity to minimise uncertainty, delivering transformation and how to build efficiencies through joint-working.

For copies and more information on how the IDeA is supporting councils, please contact your **regional associate** or Liz Ridler on 0779 529 1003 or [liz.ridler@idea.gov.uk](mailto:liz.ridler@idea.gov.uk)

### scrutiny is a big issue at party conferences

We had several conversations at the political party conferences that suggest many councillors are in need of active support on scrutiny. The demand has surprised us and if your council is in need of support, the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) can help.

During IDeA roundtable discussions and improvement surgeries, councillors talked about greater support within their councils on delivering effective overview and scrutiny.

The CfPS and the IDeA are working hard to improve scrutiny support for councillors. For more support for your council's scrutiny work, please visit the CfPS website <http://www.cfps.org.uk> or contact Jessica Crowe on 020 7296 6835 or e-mail [jessica.crowe@cfps.org.uk](mailto:jessica.crowe@cfps.org.uk).



## developing a talented workforce

### desktop coach for middle managers

The development of management, from political skills through to team building, is the focus of a new guide called **Emerging Leadership**. It helps middle managers focus on three areas: their own strengths and weaknesses; the learning cycle, and how external forces affect their work.

The book, which can be downloaded free from the IDEA website, contains practical exercises on subjects like managing change and teamwork and complements existing internal development programmes.

For more information on the IDEA's work around management development, please contact Fola Agbalaya on 0776 625 1649 or e-mail [folagabalaya@idea.gov.uk](mailto:folagabalaya@idea.gov.uk).

### Vale Royal is Best Council to Work For

Back in April, the IDEA asked you to put yourselves forward so we could find out the 'best councils to work for'. The methodology is based on the successful Sunday Times Best Companies model, and over 26,000 employees from 56 councils were surveyed. The winner was announced at the first annual awards ceremony on 25 September in London. Congratulations to Vale Royal who won, and Wychavon as the runners up.

This is the first year the list has been published. We are aware of concerns expressed by larger councils about their capacity to hit the target for staff survey respondents, and the award appeared to favour smaller councils.

Size may not be the sole issue, however, since plenty of large multinationals such as Microsoft have done well in the Best Companies award. However we are reviewing the approach to ensure that there are no unintended biases or unfair barriers to entry. We are confident the methodology itself is sound, and that councils will find it useful to be able to benchmark themselves against other councils, and also companies in the private sector.

You can find out more about the Best Councils scheme on **IDEA Knowledge** or contact Nigel Carruthers on [nigel.carruthers@idea.gov.uk](mailto:nigel.carruthers@idea.gov.uk)



## improving places through partnership

### **Sarah Wood heads third sector commissioning**

The IDeA has appointed Sarah Wood to head its work on third sector commissioning. Sarah is a former Deputy Chief Executive in Glasgow and Birmingham and a former Director of Finance and Performance at the LGA and joins the IDeA from the Border and Immigration Agency.

The Office for the Third Sector (OTS) appointed the IDeA to host the **National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning**. This programme aims to build understanding of the role of third sector organisations in the design and delivery of services.

Working as a delivery partner with the OTS, the IDeA will work with 2,000 commissioners from across the public sector, and the work will include such areas as:

- local government and community health services
- employment services
- services for offenders

Sarah Wood can be contacted on 0778 998 8737 or e-mail [sarah.wood@idea.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.wood@idea.gov.uk)



## helping people and communities

### understanding neighbourhoods

If councils want to get closer to communities, they have to know what makes people tick.

The stories in a new book called **Transforming Neighbourhoods** are based on the experiences of people working at the frontline of community engagement in 15 councils, from Cornwall to Sheffield and Surrey to Liverpool, that have understanding, and have made a real difference as a result.

*Transforming Neighbourhoods*, which is published by the Young Foundation in partnership with the IDeA, offers four key lessons that are essential for neighbourhood working in councils:

- flexible and responsive structures that reflect real need and circumstances
- while structures matter, the processes put in place to shape, design and implement them are also crucial
- that dedicated and enthusiastic activists need strong support to develop the community skills, experience and trust needed to work in such a complex environment
- an organisational culture that is committed to embedding community engagement at the heart of council business

Hazel Blears, secretary of state for Communities and Local Government, is launching the book in Westminster on Monday 8 October at 6pm.

If you would like more information about the IDeA's work on neighbourhood working, please contact Kamal Panchal on 020 7296 6618 or e-mail [kamal.panchal@idea.gov.uk](mailto:kamal.panchal@idea.gov.uk). Copies of the book can be ordered from the **Young Foundation** website.

## dates for your diary...

### the IDeA @ SOLACE Annual Conference

The IDeA is hosting two events at the Solace conference in Cardiff from 9–11 October, and directors and regional associates will be meeting delegates from the IDeA stand (number 21 and 22). Details of our events on wellbeing with Geoff Mulgan, director of the Young Foundation, and a migration workshop are below.

#### evening reception: Politics of Wellbeing

Tuesday 9th October, 6.30pm–7.30pm  
Plaza Suite, Park Plaza Hotel  
Speakers: Lucy de Groot, Executive Director, IDeA  
Geoff Mulgan, Director, Young Foundation

Economic output has nearly doubled in the last 30 years, but there has been no increase in happiness. Most of the factors that affect happiness are local - family, neighbourhood, work and the immediate environment.

At this evening reception, Geoff Mulgan will introduce the Young Foundation's work with councils on improving wellbeing, which the IDeA supports. Geoff worked at the heart of Whitehall as the former Prime Minister's Chief Policy Advisor and now leads an organisation committed to community-based working.

### workshop:

**Managing the New European Migration**  
Wednesday 10th October, 11.30am - 12.45pm  
Conference Suite 1, Cardiff International Arena  
**chair:** Lucy de Groot, Executive Director, IDeA  
**speakers:** Andre Pate, Chief Executive, West Wiltshire District Council and Councillor  
Roger Phillips, Leader, Herefordshire Council

The recently enlarged Europe is bringing new migrants to Britain, particularly to rural areas that have not previously received a large number of migrant workers from the new EU states and follows the recent publication **New European Migration**, by the IDeA.

Managing this migration is pitching local councils into new territory, which requires leadership and well-judged responses. This workshop will help participants understand the influence of migration on a range of strategic issues, including community cohesion, housing, education and delivering local services.

For more information visit  
**[www.solaceconference.org.uk](http://www.solaceconference.org.uk)**  
or email **[eddie.gibb@idea.gov.uk](mailto:eddie.gibb@idea.gov.uk)**