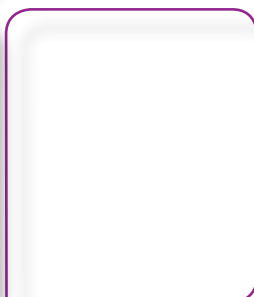
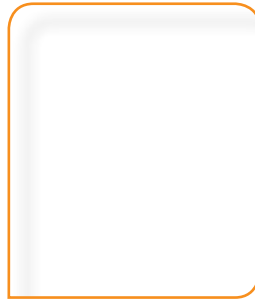


# Setting the pace

Developing a framework for sector-led help  
Consultation paper



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# Introduction

This consultation document suggests a new framework for self-improvement for local authorities in England. It builds on earlier LGA/ IDeA proposals including Driving Improvement and **Developing the New Performance Framework for Localities**.<sup>1</sup> In addition to sector-led improvement, the other main component of those proposals was self-evaluation which, following successful piloting, is now being rolled out across authorities and is officially recognised by the comprehensive area assessment (CAA) process.

It proposes a greater role for councils in owning and sharing amongst themselves the responsibility for their own improvement. That would mean a changed role for the regional and national improvement bodies, and a reduction in the role of central government and regulators.

We are working to ensure maximum engagement in the consultation process.

You can take part before the consultation closes on 1 July 2009 by:

Contributing to the online consultation at [www.idea.gov.uk/settingthepace](http://www.idea.gov.uk/settingthepace)

You can also access copies of the full consultation document there, by calling 020 7296 3131 or emailing [settingthepace@idea.gov.uk](mailto:settingthepace@idea.gov.uk)

If you wish to discuss this further, please contact your IDeA Regional Associate [www.idea.gov.uk/regionalassociates](http://www.idea.gov.uk/regionalassociates)

Written submissions should be sent to Setting the Pace Consultation, Improvement and Development Agency, Layden House, 76-86 Turnmill Street, London EC1M 5LG

Or emailed to [settingthepace@idea.gov.uk](mailto:settingthepace@idea.gov.uk)

*Footnote* <sup>1</sup> LGA and IDeA, Driving Improvement: A New Performance Framework for Localities, London, February 2006. LGA and IDeA, Developing the New Performance Framework for Localities, London, March 2007.

# Foreword

## Chair of the LGA Improvement Board and Chair of the IDeA

### Although local government has shown continuous improvement over recent years, there are reasons why we are not and cannot afford to be complacent:

- A new regulatory framework is being introduced – comprehensive area assessment – and while it is too soon to judge its impact, just the change in regime may leave weaknesses in some authorities exposed as new and different aspects of performance will be evaluated.
- The current economic crisis means that authorities will be serving communities whose levels of need are increasing at the same time as the income available to meet those needs is being reduced. Some are already feeling caught between a rock and a hard place even before resources are further squeezed in the next national spending review.
- There are aspects of our approach that we acknowledge still need further development; in particular, our ability to facilitate the delivery of significant capacity to turn things around, corporately or at a service level, when there are serious failings in high risk areas.
- While ministers may want to be sympathetic and open to a local government led approach to improvement, the absence of a clear framework leaves room for them to respond in an interventionist way where a authority is seen to be in crisis.

This consultation framework aims to stimulate a debate within authorities, regional improvement and efficiency partnerships (RIEPs), the regulatory regime and other interested bodies about what kind of an approach local government should collectively be taking, in this turbulent context, to help those authorities that face particular difficulties. We ask you to recognise that this draft framework is a serious attempt to make progress in a difficult and contentious area and welcome your comments on and criticisms of it.

To be effective the approach will, in particular:

- Need to foster the development of a culture of openness within and across authorities. Openness about areas of weakness as well as of strength, so

issues can be tackled early with support from local government's improvement architecture (RIEPs, IDeA etc) where it can help to accelerate progress.

- Include clearer roles for the key parts of the local government improvement architecture, authorities themselves, the RIEPs, the IDeA and the Local Government Association (LGA).

While we are not complacent, we have a track-record of which we can be proud and which gives credibility to our assertion that the government should continue the journey on which it has embarked, and appropriately reduce the role of 'field forces,' inspection and intervention.

We want to know whether there is widespread support within local government for such a sector-led approach and if so, how far it should go and how fast. How far should it be about doing what we currently do, but doing it better: about building on the sort of corporate support we have given to poor and weak authorities and now enhancing our ability to facilitate the delivery of significant capacity to turn things around, corporately or at a service level where this is needed? And how far should we be seeking to establish a comprehensive set of arrangements, to which all authorities seriously commit, which are designed to spot and prevent all potential service or corporate failure?

We also want to hear from Government and regulatory bodies who are likely to have an interest in, and views on, how a more strongly local government led approach will work effectively with them, particularly in the most challenging circumstances, such as when, as is still occasionally the case, a authority has a combination of corporate weaknesses and service failures.

The answer to all these questions will determine what happens after this consultation: whether we can move straight into implementation or whether we need to distil the responses into a more tightly defined framework on which further consultation would be necessary.

**Councillor David Parsons, CBE**

**Councillor Ian Swithenbank, CBE**

# Executive summary

- a. Local government can demonstrate an enviable record of improvement over recent years. The strength of the self-improvement approach was recognised when the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy was published by CLG and the LGA in December 2007. There is, however, no room for complacency. Local government needs to introduce a clearer framework that describes how it will work with authorities facing particular difficulties to support and facilitate their improvement. We are asking at the same time that central government and the regulatory regime step back, in order to give local government the opportunity to demonstrate it can be responsible for its own improvement.
- b. For the framework to be effective four factors were judged to be critical:
- Identifying early warning signs of difficulty
  - Building trust and confidence
  - Recognising the importance of, and sustaining political ownership
  - A clearer framework of support architecture.

## Key concepts and principles

The framework has been informed by the following key concepts and principles:

- **Nowhere left behind** – We believe that local government as a whole cannot allow failure, because of the impact both on communities and on the reputation of local government as a whole (with the public and other key partners/ stakeholders).
- **Family first** – Local government should be given first shot at sorting out our own problems before governmental/regulatory intervention. The rationale for this is that a local government led approach is more likely to be effective, sustainable and likely to be less expensive.
- **Critical friends** – For local government help to work, local government support bodies, working with councillor and officer peers, need to both build trust and confidence with authorities and provide real challenge.
- **Working together for the sake of our shared reputation** – Local government as a whole (together with individual authorities needs to take responsibility for its own successes and problems. This means top performers may need to loan out capacity to those in need. This concept also requires collaboration between sector support bodies, not competition.
- **Doing the hard, 'soft' stuff** – We want to keep the emphasis of this framework on what works: the use of our most experienced and skilled political and officer peers, the use of judgement by those peers as individuals and working as part of a team, the development of trust in relationships that allow challenge and help to be given and received. This means the approach will not be overly bureaucratic, involve extensive tick-lists or detailed procedures (the easy, but we would argue, relatively ineffective 'hard' stuff).
- **Ownership is key** – The primary responsibility for any council's improvement lies with that authority. Local government can offer support, advice, expertise and challenge but the authority needs to drive its own improvement journey. Improvement support offered will therefore generally need to be bespoke and co-designed with the authority.

# Summary of consultation questions

## **Consultation question 1** – page 7

To what extent should a local government led help framework seek to address issues across local partnerships as well as within authorities?

## **Consultation question 2** – page 7

Can this framework cover the full range of council services right from the start? Should the framework be developed over a period of time, and if so what basis would we use to phase that development?

## **Consultation question 3** – page 9

Has the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy met the original expectations of clarifying the improvement architecture, devolving responsibility for improvement to local government, leading to improved support and better outcomes for citizens?

## **Consultation question 4** – page 10

Are these four critical success factors the right ones to measure any new framework by, and if not, what else is needed?

## **Consultation question 5** – page 12

How far do you agree with the key strengths and areas for development of the current government-led and sector-led approaches?

## **Consultation question 6** – page 13

Is the protection of the reputation of local government as a whole sufficient incentive for councillors and officers agree to take responsibility for providing support in another authority?

## **Consultation question 7** – page 14

Do you agree with the key concepts and principles outlined, and if not, what else is needed?

## **Consultation question 8** – page 16

Does your authority support the idea of greater local government-led support, with a view to reducing the regulatory burden, and would it be prepared to sign a commitment to that effect?

## **Consultation question 9** – page 16

How can adherence to the terms of the mutuality statement be guaranteed? Does it need a legally binding component? What other rewards and sanctions are available? How should any local authorities that do not sign up or subsequently withdraw be treated?

## **Consultation question 10** – page 18

Would the proposed commitments from RIEPs produce tangible benefits for local authorities?

## **Consultation question 11** – page 19

Are the peer-led models of improvement currently used by the sector robust enough to meet the new challenges this framework suggests? If not, how would they need to be improved?

## **Consultation Question 12** – page 19

The clearing house role was suggested by one of the participants following the December event. If needed, is this role best undertaken by the IDeA and/or by the RIEP or by the two working together?

## **Consultation Question 13** – page 20

How could the respective roles and responsibilities be further refined?

## **Consultation Question 14** – page 20

Who should begin the dialogue with an authority about the need for support if they themselves do not seek it?

## **Consultation Question 15** – page 20

What assurance can we provide that the sector will be sufficiently robust and challenging of itself? Can we provide sufficient incentive to 'coasting' authorities to improve?

## **Consultation question 16** – page 21

Are there other actions or commitments that local government should be asking for?

## **Consultation question 17** – page 21

This framework involves enhanced roles and responsibilities for all five parts of the current system. Would it still work if any one part was not playing its full role?

# Definitions and scope of framework

1. This consultation paper has been produced to describe how local government (individual authorities and the local government owned improvement support architecture) will work together to overcome the particular difficulties that any authority may at some time face.
2. The following scenarios may help to illustrate what is meant by 'particular difficulties':
  - **Authority 1** has a strong track record on improvement and community leadership but has recently become aware of weaknesses in aspects of children's services that could result in, most importantly, unsafe practice, and also damage to the reputation of the authority.
  - **Authority 2** has services that are generally performing well but has developed poor relationships between officers and members and between different political groups. These are resulting in poor media coverage and are affecting the quality of decision making.
3. The local government sector has had more experience in helping turn around authorities in difficulties corporately than in service areas. Being able to guarantee the skills and capacity to cover the full range of local authority services is a considerable challenge. Should these proposals offer a full range of support from the outset or build it up in a programmed way? If the latter, on what basis could it be built up (for example, focus on a limited range of services initially or only focus on the very worst performing areas, such as those which threaten the reputation of the authority and the sector as a whole)?
4. The focus of this consultation paper is currently on authorities. There are however several places where the paper touches on dysfunctional partnerships. There is a wider debate to be had about the extent to which authorities are taking responsibility for poor performance/behaviour across local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and this issue probably needs to be examined in more depth as part of the follow-up to this paper.

## ■ ■ Consultation question 1

**To what extent should a local government led help framework seek to address issues across local partnerships as well as within authorities?**

## ■ ■ Consultation question 2

**Can this framework cover the full range of council services right from the start? Should the framework be developed over a period of time, and if so, what basis would we use to phase that development?**

# Background: the story so far...

## A strong record of improvement

5. Significant improvements in the performance of English local authorities are a clear reminder that local government's record of achievement remains strong. The introduction of comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2002 provided both the impetus for change and a benchmark by which local authorities could monitor and take responsibility for their own improvement agenda with support, advocacy and assessment provided by the RIEPs, IDeA, the wider LGA group and the Audit Commission. In particular, improvements in corporate management and political leadership during the time of CPA have led to some authorities moving from poor in 2002 to the top star category in 2008. The last set of CPA scores released before the introduction of CAA in April this year is an indication of how far authorities have come.
6. In December 2002 the first CPA results were published and the number of 'Good' or 'Excellent' single-tier or county councils was 76. By March 2009, when the 2008 scores were announced, the number of 3 or 4-star authorities had increased to 119, despite the introduction of the 'Harder Test' in 2005, which raised standards. At the same time the number of 0 or 1-star authorities has reduced from 34 to just four.

## But we need to do more

7. The case for sector-led improvement has been made, accepted and is reflected in the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy. However, despite the track record of improvement success and a clear policy direction, many of the behaviours, both in central and local government, reflect the old top-down ways of working. In January 2008, the IDeA published Clive Grace and Professor Steve Martin's *Getting Better All the Time? An Independent Assessment of Local Government Improvement and its Future Prospects*.<sup>2</sup> Their essay, commissioned by the IDeA for the sector, set out some fundamental challenges to the system in terms of the next stage of improvement in local government. Three key challenges were identified:

- a) **Government and regulators** are still implicitly working with an old model of improvement, largely based on top-down approaches, which is not fit for the new world that local authorities and their partners find themselves in.
  - b) Both **central and local government** are struggling to turn the rhetoric of reform into the realities of implementation:
    - central government to let go, and
    - local government to take responsibility and move beyond compliance.
  - c) The **improvement challenges ahead** will not require merely incremental improvement but embedded innovation.
8. The **National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy**<sup>3</sup> agreed by the LGA and central government and published January 2008 established a new devolved 'system' for sector-led improvement. With local government at the heart of driving continued performance in local public services, new roles were given to RIEPs, the IDeA, the LGA and, indeed, government. While the system is developing rapidly and can already point to success, the challenge of a coherent and agreed response from all partners remains. In the absence of a defined response, old behaviours cannot be challenged and will persist, central government may not let go and authorities may fail to move beyond compliance.

*Footnote*<sup>2</sup> Grace, Clive and Steve Martin, *Getting Better All the Time? An Independent Assessment of local government improvement and future prospects*, IDeA, London, January 2008

*Footnote*<sup>3</sup> CLG and LGA, *National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy*, London, January 2008.

9. *Setting the pace* poses a challenge to all parts of the system. Authorities need to engage, be open to challenge and scrutiny and accept the responsibility that their performance reflects on the sector as a whole. RIEPs need to provide help to authorities facing difficulties. The IDeA needs to use its peer expertise to support this engagement and provide some of the underpinning infrastructure. The LGA needs to provide overall political leadership (building on its groundbreaking commitment to ‘no poors and weaks’). Ministers, understandably, want reassurance about the performance of local authorities so there is a reduced risk of unpleasant surprises – reassurance that the current regulatory regime has not always provided. The Government and regulators, will, of course, ultimately step in when services fail, but they have to accept that the need for them to step in can only be reduced if, at a system level, they step back.

### ■ ■ **Consultation question 3**

**Has the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy met the original expectations of clarifying the improvement architecture, devolving responsibility for improvement to local government leading to improved support and better outcomes for citizens?**

# The foundation upon which the proposals are built

## Local government led help event

10. This consultation paper develops the initial thinking from an event held in early December 2008, when leading councillors including political peers and chief executives from across the country came together to discuss how to develop a framework for sector-led support for authorities facing particular difficulties (attendee list included as appendix 3.)

11. The group's thinking was informed by its experience of working in and with authorities facing unusually severe problems over many years. The roles of those contributing included:

- chief executives, and leading councillors who had worked to turn their authorities around, with assistance from local government's support agencies, peers, and the regulators
- political and officer peers
- members of RIEP governance structures and sub-regional partnerships
- leading members of the LGA including its executive, the improvement board, the performance support panel and the political improvement boards
- IDeA, RIEP and LGA officers.

12. The event provided an opportunity to air issues, share perspectives and approaches and deepen our collective understanding of what is a difficult and sensitive area of improvement work. Although the focus for the event was work with authorities facing particular difficulties, some of the thinking is relevant to the broader question of the nature, strengths and challenges of sector-led support with all authorities and partnerships. The thinking from the event has informed this consultation framework. In addition, those present identified four critical success factors:

- **Identifying early warning signs of difficulty**  
To be effective, a local government led framework needs to have mechanisms in place to ensure timely recognition of problems and effective support where necessary. There are already mechanisms in place for highlighting signs of difficulties including self-awareness, inspectorate reports, intelligence/'talk' within local government and political group structures.

However, there is also a recognition that this could be achieved on a more transparent and systematic basis.

- **Building trust and confidence**

It is important that we are able to develop a framework where authorities are open to challenge from peers and where peers are able to provide challenge in an open and constructive way. The framework for sector-led engagement also needs to facilitate high levels of trust between the individual authority and local government's improvement architecture.

- **Recognising the importance of and sustaining political ownership**

A sector-led framework should fully recognise the role of politics in supporting authorities in difficulty. Political ownership of problems and support to tackle them is vital – at a national, a regional and a local level. It is essential political parties accept and own problems in their authorities and that they understand the need to take responsibility for being part of the solution. Local government also needs to have a framework for supporting the increasing number of authorities with no overall control.

- **A clearer framework of support architecture**

It is important that the support architecture is clear so that authorities know where to go and the level of support available to help them in challenging situations. This could take the form of a clearer support 'map'. Alternatively, the group suggested it might be more helpful to provide a guide to support based on particular scenarios.

13. Further thinking about these critical success factors is summarised in appendix 1.

## ■ ■ Consultation question 4

**Are these four critical success factors the right ones to measure any new framework by, and if not, what else is needed?**

# Evaluation of current approaches

14. Set out below is a brief evaluation of the strengths and areas for development in the current approaches taken both by government and regulators, and by local government. These inform the principles and proposals later in the paper.

## Key strengths and areas for development of the government approach

### Strengths

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CPA, as well as representing a huge opportunity cost, has increased authorities' focus on areas of core competence and brought about improvement as a result. However it is now felt to have reached the limits of its effectiveness and it is too early yet to evaluate the impact of the new CAA regime.

The inspection and audit regime is valued where it is focused on the protection of vulnerable service users, and on probity, public accountability and value for money.

### Areas for development

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Inspection and audit should be focused on assessment activity rather than improvement activity. There have been recent concerns about the effectiveness of inspection even in those areas where it is considered most important – particularly safeguarding.

There is a lack of clarity on the respective roles of Government Offices and the Audit Commission in monitoring performance.

The number and cost of government-commissioned improvement bodies and field forces is excessive and needs to be radically reduced.

Some examples of intervention seem geared to ministers being seen to act in the face of bad publicity – rather than by what is most likely to be effective.

'...if our performance indicators say we are delivering, then for heaven's sake, leave us alone. Inspections are time consuming, sap the energy of officers, and take the capacity away from us delivering our key targets. [...] don't inspect local government to death. Don't be overly bureaucratic about it.'

Iain Malcolm, Leader of South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council

# Key strengths and areas for development of the current sector-led approach

## Strengths

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RIEPs have broadened and deepened ownership of the shared improvement and efficiency agenda.

There is a high level of confidence in IDeA's track record in working with and co-designing bespoke, peer-based improvement programmes for authorities facing difficulties.

Accredited political and officer peers are crucial in facilitating improvement.

## Areas for development

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Our ability to deploy capacity to deliver solutions/ provide support needs to be developed further, with a particular need to build capacity in specific service areas.

Insufficiently developed range of approaches where there is not local ownership of the improvement issue.

We need to develop further approaches to working on partnership issues.

There is insufficient shared understanding of the contribution of the LGA to the improvement agenda.

Although far simpler than the governmental/ regulatory architecture, there is still confusion about the roles and contribution of different sector-led bodies.

## ■ ■ Consultation question 5

**How far do you agree with the key strengths and areas for development of the current government-led and sector-led approaches?**

# Underpinning assumptions

15. There are a number of areas where there appear to be high levels of consensus across local government:
- a) All authorities have strengths that others can learn from and problem areas where they need support.
  - b) Leading councillors and officers need to accept and understand that they have a responsibility to contribute to improvement and address underperformance in other local authorities as well as their own to protect the reputation of local government.
  - c) Support and challenge from within local government is likely to be far more effective because it involves credible officer and councillor practitioners who know how to make change happen on the ground. It is also likely to be considerably less expensive than government intervention.
  - d) Therefore, local government and its support agencies assert that they should be given early notice of potential problems identified through the inspections process/regulatory regime and to address agreed areas of weakness before any government intervention is taken.
  - e) For sector-led support to be effective the authority concerned has to be prepared to acknowledge the need to improve and accept help.
  - f) There may be times when local government as a whole will act as an advocate for a authority if that authority is asserting its right to, for example, set locally appropriate priorities.
  - g) The Government has the right to intervene if a sector-led approach has not worked in a particular authority.

## ■ ■ Consultation question 6

**Is the protection of the reputation of local government as a whole sufficient incentive for councillors and officers to agree to take responsibility for providing support in another authority?**

# Key concepts and principles

16. Given these underpinning assumptions, the framework needs to be informed by the following key concepts and principles:

- **Nowhere left behind** – We believe that local government as a whole cannot allow failure, because of the impact both on communities and on the reputation of local government as a whole (with the public and other key partners/ stakeholders).
- **Family first** – Local government should be given first shot at sorting out our own problems before governmental/regulatory intervention. The rationale for this is that a local government led approach is more likely to be effective, sustainable and less expensive.<sup>4</sup>
- **Critical friends** – For local government help to work, local government support bodies, working with councillor and officer peers, need to both build trust and confidence with authorities and also provide real challenge.
- **Working together for the sake of our shared reputation** – Local government as a whole (together with individual authorities) needs to take responsibility for each other's successes and problems. This means top performers in a particular service or function may need to loan out capacity to those in need based on an assumption of reciprocity from other local authorities when needed. This concept also requires collaboration between sector support bodies, not competition.
- **Doing the hard, 'soft' stuff** – We want to keep the emphasis of this framework on what works; the use of our most experienced and skilled political and officer peers, the use of judgement by those peers as individuals and working as part of a team, the development of trust in relationships that allow challenge and help to be given and received. This means the approach will not be overly bureaucratic, involve extensive tick-lists or detailed procedures (the easy, but we would argue, relatively ineffective 'hard' stuff).

- **Ownership is key** – The primary responsibility for any council's improvement lies with that authority. Local government can offer support, advice, expertise and challenge but the authority needs to drive its own improvement journey. Improvement support offered will therefore generally need to be bespoke and co-designed with the authority.

## ■ ■ Consultation question 7

**Do you agree with the key concepts outlined, and if not, what else is needed?**

*Footnote 4* 'Where performance problems are identified, support from within the local government community should be the default position, with central government involvement as the exception.' Skelcher, Chris; Pam Fox, Michael Hughes, Pauline Jas, Peter Watt, Philip Whiteman, Learning from the Experience of Recovery. From Turnaround to Improvement: Third Annual Report, Department for Communities and Local Government, London, September 2006.

# Proposals

17. The proposed framework is broken into five parts:

- The role of individual authorities
- The role of RIEPs
- The role of the LGA
- The role of IDeA and the other local government improvement bodies
- Government and regulatory regime: the ask

18. To help build an understanding of how the approach works and will work in future a number of scenarios are then outlined.

19. The framework allows for considerable flexibility, necessary to optimise the variety of improvement support resources available and to match the variety of local circumstances. However, within this flexibility there need to be clear arrangements which maximise the extent to which corporate and service weaknesses are anticipated, identified and dealt with, with no risk of it falling between stools. In summary, the framework would operate in the following way:

- Authorities continually monitor their own performance (for example, through performance management, community engagement and scrutiny), undertake a self-evaluation every year and peer-led external challenge of corporate health every three to four years.
- The vast majority of performance issues will be dealt with routinely by authorities directly themselves or with external commercial or public sector support.
- RIEPs monitor the improvement challenges of authorities in their region and in particular identify emerging serious performance difficulties, drawing on intelligence from a range of sources including other improvement bodies, regulators and government.
- The IDeA, working closely with the RIEPs, acts as a confidential clearing house for sensitive issues.
- Where actual or potential performance difficulties are identified, the RIEP facilitates discussions with the authority and other stakeholders leading to agreement on the way forward and appropriate improvement support.

- The IDeA facilitates peer support and direct help if needed.
- Where the difficulties have an otherwise intractable political cause or dimension, the LGA may need to broker discussions with appropriate politicians.
- Higher performing authorities /services make available officers and members to help the authority in difficulty.
- If a situation is reached where a government department is contemplating an improvement notice or using other intervention powers, a meeting is first called with the relevant authority (including the relevant politicians), the RIEP and other appropriate sector improvement bodies, to see whether, as an alternative, an effective sector-led approach is feasible.

# Role of individual authorities

20. We are consulting on whether we should be asking all authorities across the country to sign up to a statement that would include:

- Commitment to the key concepts and principles that emerge through this consultation process
- Commitment to undertake self-evaluation annually and to engage in a peer-led external challenge of corporate health at least every three to four years
- A commitment to contributing to improvement across local government by engaging in RIEPs, providing councillor and officer peer and other support to other authorities and sharing learning and knowledge through a variety of routes including communities of practice, etc
- Agree performance information collected by Government Office and the inspectorates can be shared with the RIEP/IDeA via the National Improvement and Efficiency Programme Office\*
- A commitment to have early, confidential, conversations with the IDeA, or the RIEP or, for councillors, with the relevant IDeA lead political peers about local governance and performance challenges where local government help might be useful.

## Mutuality Statements

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A number of RIEPs have mutuality statements – this is one of them.

‘This council welcomes the creation of Capital Ambition, the Regional Improvement Partnership in London. It joins with other London authorities in recognising that improving services to Londoners requires collective commitment.

This council is responsible for its own improvement but it also acknowledges that this can best be achieved by working with others in London and nationally.

This council undertakes to participate in Capital Ambition by contributing to its work and by working with it for this council’s own improvement.’

## ■ ■ Consultation question 8

**Does your authority support the idea of greater sector-led support, with a view to reducing the regulatory burden, and would it be prepared to sign a commitment to that effect?**

## ■ ■ Consultation question 9

**How can adherence to the terms of the mutuality statement be guaranteed? Does it need a legally binding component? What other rewards and sanctions are available? How should any local authorities that do not sign up or subsequently withdraw be treated?**

\* The National Improvement and Efficiency Programme Office is hosted within IDeA and was established to facilitate the implementation of the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy in particular by supporting the RIEPs and ensuring effective collaboration across local government’s improvement architecture.

# Role of RIEPs

21. Individual RIEPs will want to take different approaches to their role. They were, after all, established because of recognition that the geography, patterns of different types of authorities and history of different regions necessitate different approaches to collaborating for improvement. So, recognising how the nine RIEPs fulfil their role will vary, this paper proposes that RIEPs:

- Confirm their commitment to supporting authorities and partnerships in difficulty, ensuring resources are devoted to prevention and support
- Work out how they will, through regular discussion, keep in touch with the improvement challenges of all the authorities in their region, and, in particular, ensure they are aware of any more serious difficulties in individual authorities
- Facilitate effective collaboration across local government's improvement bodies within the region including the regional employers organisations, the IDeA and the Local Government Employers and Leadership Centre in order to maximise their contribution
- Consider how they will facilitate access to support based on identified best practice within and beyond the region for individual authorities and for groups of authorities where there are issues in common across several authorities in a region
- Agree protocols about sharing information by Government Offices and inspectorates with the RIEPs and how it will be used
- Consider funding a peer review(s) for each authority on a regular basis.

22. The following examples give a summarised account of the approach being developed in two regions.

## The South West

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The South West has had more authorities in difficulty than other regions, and has adopted a good way of working with these authorities. The South West RIEP (SWRIEP) agrees an improvement plan with each authority facing difficulties with specific outcomes and measures. It then funds a significant amount of that plan and puts in place a monitoring mechanism to ensure targets etc are met. In addition, it pays for mentoring, peer reviews and places on Leadership Academy and Academy for Executive Leadership courses to help develop officers and members.

## The North East

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The North East is developing an approach based on a culture of transparency in relation to performance, and on being improvement focused rather than punitive.

The new performance framework is seen as providing an opportunity for the Government and inspectorates to better coordinate their approaches to localities, and to work in partnership with the North East Improvement Partnership (NERIEP) to provide improved support and challenge to local areas. In line with the local performance framework, improvement activity will to be locally led, and in many cases voluntary early engagement with the RIEP and the IDeA will take place, which may lead to some sector-led peer support. Beyond this, two new mechanisms to provide formal coordination are being introduced:

- 1. Joint local meetings** between the local council/local strategic partnership, the Government Office for the North East (GONE) and the Audit Commission to agree any significant underperformance/efficiency/good practice issues which would be helpful to refer to the RIEP or consider at a regional level. These could be built around existing liaison meetings.
- 2. A regional roundtable**, say twice a year, will consider the regional view on local area agreement/multi-area agreement/public service agreement delivery, areas where learning and best practice can be shared, areas where the RIEP or others can offer support. For local government, this exercise will be conducted through the Association of North East Councils Regional Chief Executives Group and involve GONE, the Audit Commission and the IDeA.

Whilst most underperformance issues will be dealt with through local partnership performance management, joint local meetings will consider those underperformance issues that are seen as critical, and are proving difficult to solve locally. The meeting will consider how issues are being tackled, and lead to three possible outcomes:

- Strong local improvement plans are in place: the issue does not need regional/RIEP input. Progress will be reviewed at the next joint local meeting.
- Issue to be referred to the regional round table/ RIEP, with the agreement of the locality. This is likely where RIEP support is required or where the issue may be relevant in other localities.
- The Audit Commission/GONE is not satisfied that the issue is being adequately dealt with locally but the locality does not agree to seek support or refer to regional round table. In this situation further government or inspectorate action is likely to follow, such as a 'red flag' of the performance area, further audit or inspection work or an improvement notice.

### ■ ■ Consultation question 10

**Would the proposed commitments from RIEPs produce tangible benefits for local authorities?**

# Role of the IDeA

## and the other local government improvement bodies

23. The IDeA has considerable, recognised expertise in the deployment of political and managerial peers to help authorities (of all CPA categories) open themselves up to challenge and assist them to bring about improvement. These peer approaches are uniquely powerful in authorities facing particular difficulties. The IDeA role is therefore to:

- Provide support and expertise to authorities in developing their response to their particular improvement challenges.
- The recruitment, accreditation, development and deployment of councillor and officer peers to provide support, challenge and capacity to authorities.
- To act as a coordinating link between the local government improvement bodies, professional associations, other national improvement bodies, and other national stakeholders including government and inspectorates and advise and support RIEPS and the LGA members.
- Act as a confidential clearing house for people to raise concerns about an authority – these will be then followed up as appropriate by sensitive conversations with the council's senior councillors and/or officers.

24. In addition to the IDeA, the Leadership Centre has provided useful support in some authorities where there have been political problems and Local Government Employers (as well as regional employers' organisations) have done the same where there are problems in the relationship between chief executives and political administrations. The IDeA will play a coordinating role with the Leadership Centre, Local Government Employers and other local government central bodies to ensure well coordinated support is provided.

### ■ ■ Consultation question 11

**Are the peer-led models of improvement currently used by the sector robust enough to meet the new challenges this framework suggests?**

### ■ ■ Consultation Question 12

**The clearing house role was suggested by one of the participants following the December event. If needed is this role best undertaken by the IDeA and/or by the RIEP or by the two working together?**

'We were ... able to 'shortcut' some of the learning involved, based on the experience of our peers, and move our improvement agenda on more quickly as a result. Equally important, however, was the boost the process gave the morale and confidence of our staff in tackling the next wave of change and improvement for the council and its partners.

In short, we found it a far more emotionally intelligent approach than our previous experience of government intervention, not least because we 'owned' the process.'

Kim Ryley, Chief Executive, Hull City Council

# Role of the LGA

25. Political ownership is crucial to addressing improvement issues. If the difficulties facing an authority are to do with managerial weaknesses, its authority's councillors need to take steps to address these. If the problems are a result of political dysfunction, the wider political architecture will need to play a role to support change. The LGA leadership, through its political groups and improvement boards, therefore has a role that includes:

- Challenging poor performance in local authorities and supporting poor performers to improve.
- In particular improvement board members will take steps to help, by having discussions with leading councillors in an authority where barriers to improvement have a political and cross-party dimension.
- Keep under review the effectiveness of local government's improvement architecture (including IDeA, RIEPs, and the Leadership Centre).
- Support local authorities who have come into conflict with government or regulators as a result of legitimate differences of view about the priorities in the area. If necessary, agree with the authority to commission a peer review to come to a view about the reasons for the conflict.
- The LGA political group improvement boards will link to authority/party groups in particular where dysfunction within a group has a serious adverse effect.

'I hope that in 10 years' time the council will be allowed to get on with it. I hope that we will be funded for improvement, and not punished for following our own priorities, rather than the priorities of the government.'

Jill Shortland, Leader of Somerset County Council.

## ■ ■ Consultation Question 13

**How could the respective roles and responsibilities be further refined?**

## ■ ■ Consultation Question 14

**Who should begin the dialogue with an authority about the need for support if they themselves do not seek it?**

## ■ ■ Consultation Question 15

**What assurance can we provide that the sector will be sufficiently robust and challenging of itself? Can it provide sufficient incentive to 'coasting' authorities to improve?**

'We as local government need to be convinced that a strong shared framework is our most effective way forward - we all have something to give and something to gain from collectively owning sector improvement and making it a viable alternative to unnecessary government intervention.'

Joyce Redfern, Chief Executive of Wigan Council and Chair of the national RIEP Chief Executives' Group.

# Government and regulatory regime – ‘the ask’

26. The National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy sets the context for all the proposals in this paper. Although changing roles and patterns of behaviour is always hard, there is evidence that the practice of government departments and the inspectorates is already evolving in line with the principles of the National Strategy. For example, in their work with some councils, increasingly government departments and inspectorates have:

- Recognised the importance of leaving responsibility and power in the hands of the authority to drive its own improvement in order to secure sustainable change
- Appreciated the role of and engaged with the sector’s improvement bodies including IDeA and the RIEPs.

In order to build on this progress, we now propose that in future:

- No action should be taken to serve an improvement notice or otherwise intervene with an authority over a corporate, service, or partnership delivery weakness before first giving the authority the opportunity to drive its own improvement with help from the rest of local government.
- In practice this would normally mean the authority would be asked to call a one-off meeting with the relevant government departments (and if appropriate inspectorate/audit body), the IDeA, RIEP and GO to discuss the issues and how they will be addressed. Given the importance of political ownership this would need to involve local leading members.
- Inspectorates and the Audit Commission to provide to RIEPs and the IDeA (both through the National Improvement and Efficiency Programme Office) information and analysis of the performance of individual authorities, regions and local government nationally. This will facilitate the development of relevant help and support at an individual authority, regional and national level.
- Government departments and the regulatory regime should actively address the areas for development identified in Section 14.
- Additionally we are asking that government

monitoring and support activity progressively moves from central to local government along with appropriate resources.

27. The approach set out in this paper, if adopted, provides a form of ‘insurance’ for authorities and also ensures that as a sector we minimise future risks of failure. If local government signs up to this, the reduced risk should also be recognised by government departments and inspectorates through reduced inspection.

## ■ ■ Consultation question 16

**Are there other actions or commitments that local government should be asking for?**

## ■ ■ Consultation question 17

**This framework involves enhanced roles or responsibilities for all five parts of the current system. Would it still work if any one part was not playing its full role?**

# Illustrative examples

28. In most instances, authorities will be aware of difficulties and will be keen to address them with support from a range of possible sources. Occasionally, this will not be the case and the last two scenarios below describe how we will respond. In addition to these scenarios actual examples of sector led support are given in case studies included as appendix 2.

## Scenario

## Who can authorities turn to when they recognise the challenge?

A has a strong track record on improvement and community leadership but became aware of weaknesses in aspects of children's services that could potentially result in, most importantly, unsafe practice, and also damage to the reputation of the authority

(See case study in appendix 2)

### Local government help

Peer review (corporate or service), inter-authority exchange, RIEP, sector specialists

### Other sources of help

Specialist private sector provision, voluntary sector

Work by the Audit Commission identifies concerns about the finances and culture in an authority

(See case study in appendix 2)

### Local government help

Peer review (corporate or service), inter-authority exchange, RIEP, sector specialists

### Other sources of help

Specialist private sector provision, voluntary sector

Problems with a chief officer requires an external reality check

### Local government help

Other chief executives in the region/sub-region, RIEP, IDeA regional associate or member peer, regional LGA

### Other sources of help

District Audit, standards board, political parties, CIPFA

Serious adverse incident support to handle a crisis

### Local government help

Mutual support, political peers, RIEP, IDeA regional associate, LGA

Problematic political leadership

### Local government help

LGA improvement board members, regional associates, IDeA member peers

### Other sources of help

Regional and national political parties, standards board, Audit Commission ethical governance work

Leader and chief executive relationship breakdown

### Local government help

IDeA political peers and regional associates, regional employers

## Scenario

## How should we respond in those rare cases where the challenge is not acknowledged?

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An authority has services that are generally performing well but has developed poor relationships between officers and members and between different political groups. These are resulting in poor media coverage and are considered likely to be affecting the quality of decision making.

When the issue has been raised with the IDeA and/or RIEP the next step would be likely to be a confidential discussion with the leading members in the authority and the chief executive to agree how the issues can be addressed.

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A partnership is in danger of significantly missing its agreed local area agreement delivery targets as a result of conflicting priorities and competitive behaviours between the partners

When the issue has been raised with the IDeA the next step would be likely to be a confidential discussion with the leading members in the authority and the chief executive to agree how the issues can be addressed. This may include working in partnership with other public sector improvement bodies such as the Police Improvement Agency to provide challenge and support to partners as well as the authority.

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# Consultation timeline/implementation

## Consultation process

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May Consultation paper issued to authority leaders and chief executives, RIEPs, inspectorates, CLG and other government departments.

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April/May/June Regional meetings  
RIEP lead members' meeting  
RIEP chief executives' meeting  
RIEP directors' meeting  
Political group improvement boards, CLG  
Ministers  
Commission/inspectorates

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1 July Consultation closes

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29. Consultation responses can be emailed to **settingthepace@idea.gov.uk** by 1 July. All responses will be made publicly available before the final framework is issued.

30. We will analyse all the consultation responses we receive, including the views expressed at the consultation meetings, and review our proposals. What then happens will determine whether we can move straight to implementing the production of a final framework or whether we need to distil the responses into a more tightly defined framework on which further consultation would be necessary.

Recognising the importance of effective joint working between the sector-led architecture and government departments and the regulatory regime, in parallel with this we will seek to agree with relevant bodies a replacement for Roles and Responsibilities in the Local Performance Framework, which was issued in July 2008.

## Appendix 1: Critical success factors for local government's framework

The following areas were seen as being key by the people participating in the December event.

### Identifying early warning signs of difficulty

To be effective, a local government led framework needs to have mechanisms in place to ensure timely recognition of problems and effective support where necessary. There are already mechanisms in place for highlighting signs of difficulties including self-awareness, inspectorate reports, intelligence/'talk' within local government and political group structures. However, there is also a recognition that this could be achieved on a more transparent and systematic basis.

While national data provides information on the majority of services, this is still using a national framework on national priorities and misses many of the softer or local issues. Also, it provides information within fairly narrow parameters and sometimes issues can arise in one service that can actually be more symptomatic of wider governance matters. It is important that as a sector we are smart enough to see the links or the potential domino effect. Within the context of CAA, the national focus is quite rightly on the achievement of outcomes, and where these are not being achieved, the regulators will then look to see if there are issues, such as corporate governance issues that are impacting on these matters. Within a sector-led framework, we would want to address any corporate governance issues before they have the chance to impact on outcomes and reach the realms of the inspectors.

### Building trust and confidence

- a) We need to build the space for confidential discussions and to provide timely support. This needs to include a respect for difference amongst authorities.
- b) It is important that we are able to develop a framework where authorities are open to challenge from peers and where peers are able to provide challenge in an open and constructive way.
- c) The framework for sector-led engagement also needs to facilitate high levels of trust between the individual authority and local government's improvement architecture.

d) Trust, mutual challenge and respect between local and central government must develop further. There is a need for greater clarity of roles and responsibility. There needs to be clear water between the respective role of the inspectorates, government offices and the local government improvement architecture for authorities in difficulty (and perhaps more generally). The recent document produced by CLG – Roles and Responsibilities in the Local Performance Framework (July 2008) – does not resolve this issue. Also, regulation and the current league table approach do not assist in fostering a climate of trust.

### Recognising the importance of and sustaining political ownership

- a) A sector-led framework should fully recognise the role of politics in supporting authorities in difficulty. Political ownership of problems and support to tackle them is vital – at a national, a regional and a local level. It is essential that political parties accept and own problems in their authorities and that they understand the need to take responsibility for being part of the solution. Local government also needs to have a framework for supporting the increasing number of authorities with no overall control.
- b) As improvement practitioners we need to understand that the politics can affect improvement. We need to harness the energy when parties are working well and be supportive where this is not the case.
- c) There is confusion regarding the role of regional local government associations and the national Local Government Association.

d) There is a tension for all parties between local government practitioners and members of parliament/civil servants who do not have the same grounding. This results in some 'solutions' that do not work within a political landscape and do not assist in the role of local government in leading local communities, for example directly elected police representatives. There is a need to build better relationships with civil servants and improve their understanding of local government. Similarly, within local government, we also recognise the need to better understand what drives civil servants in their work with local government. More regular two-way secondments may assist with this issue.

### **A clearer framework of support architecture**

- a) It is important that the support architecture is clear so that authorities know where to go and the level of support available to help them in challenging situations. This could take the form of a clearer support 'map'. Alternatively, the group suggested it might be more helpful to provide a guide to support based on particular scenarios.
- b) Outlined in appendix 2 are examples of scenarios and where support could be provided that were developed by the group.

## Appendix 2: Case studies

### Anonymised children's services case study

#### Summary

'Midthorpe' Council, a 4-star council under CPA, had its joint area review (JAR) in 2007 and this highlighted some areas for improvement, including safeguarding. Midthorpe had previously had good experiences of working with the IDeA to improve particular areas (such as customer services) and so approached the agency with a view to them helping to improve the council's safeguarding services.

Midthorpe wanted to learn from Local Authorities who were more successful in their experiences of integrated children's services and asked that the Beacon authorities of Oxtown Borough Council and Munbridge City be part of the team.

The IDeA and the council jointly decided to use the peer team approach to focus on safeguarding rather than the whole of children's services. The approach involved two site visits of two days each, an initial baseline assessment questionnaire and ongoing support between site visits.

#### Key learning points

- Learning from other authorities in the same situation as Midthorpe but with more successful experiences
- The process is good, but needs the local authority to plan carefully to ensure that they gain as much as possible from the experiences of others
- The peer team process is more accessible than an assessment process because it is less threatening and focuses more on development and improvement suggestions. It also allows for the other authorities to keep in touch over the longer term, and come back a few months on to see how things have progressed and help ensure progress
- The JAR identified areas for improvement which shaped the planning for the peer team process. However, the peer team uncovered the cause of the symptoms identified in the JAR, which ultimately is more useful to the council
- This kind of sharing (between authorities) is essential because everyone is doing the same things, though in very different ways, dealing with different cultures, different approaches, etc. 'It

is good to compare experiences with different authorities – you can find different elements of different authorities' approaches that can apply to your own authority'

- Conversations do happen between colleagues in similar roles in different authorities but not necessarily as critical friends to lead to improvement. In this kind of structured exchange, '...you can't fail to learn something from someone – it is a two-way process even if it starts as one authority helping another'
- The time commitment is critical and substantial. It is worth investing the time as it enables improvement to happen sooner, but it is not easy to ensure that sufficient time is available. Commitment from executive management in both the receiving and the supporting authorities is crucial here as they can ensure the resources are necessary. It is not without cost, but the initial investment is worth it as there is always something to learn
- It would be good to conduct this kind of thing regularly, but it is expensive. It can be more forward looking and helpful to the council than a JAR which identifies problems but does not detail how to make improvements.

#### Background

The JAR identified certain areas for improvement – capacity, thresholds and quality assurance – and confirmed some problems that were known about internally but not being dealt with. However, the first session of the peer team approach identified problems with the local safeguarding children board (LSCB). The roles of the members were not clear, and there were knowledge gaps which needed to be addressed before work could progress on thresholds or quality assurance.

The process has brought children's services together as a directorate. It has assisted integration and the process has helped to merge previously separate elements of the service. Problems in safeguarding were tackled as problems for the whole of children's services, and not just one section. This enabled a re-focusing of priorities which resulted in some of the successes (such as reduction in caseloads, case file audit procedures and the redeployment of Attendance and Child care Worker's to children's centres where they will work more on prevention than case management).

## Who is involved?

The national adviser for the IDeA on children's services worked with the local IDeA regional associate to plan the approach. An experienced IDeA associate project managed the peer team process and put together the team. This consisted of two officers from Oxtown Borough and Munbridge City Councils, an official from the NSPCC and a member peer.

The chief executive of the council enabled resources to be allocated to Safeguarding in order to act on the JAR and peer team recommendations.

## What are the practicalities?

An initial baseline survey was distributed to all staff concerned. Although there was a poor return rate initially, after the first site visit this improved. Three two-day site visits were planned. So far, two have taken place.

## Visit 1 – October 2007

This involved focus groups and individual interviews with key staff members. Key areas to work on were identified – the LSCB and the link to prevention work. Members of the LSCB were confused by its remit and were rather stuck on processes rather than the more strategic big picture issues. This suggested that it was not possible to work on quality assurance or thresholds until this area was dealt with.

It became clear that there needed to be better connections with the prevention team. Without doing this, the capacity of safeguarding could not be improved.

## Visit 2 – December 2007

This involved more interviews and some practice-sharing seminars.

## What is the impact / what has happened as a result?

- Reducing caseloads through creative means – looking at caseloads across the whole of children's services and re-focusing priorities. Some cases moved from case management (Children in Need and Child Protection) to the youth offending service and Leaving Care. This has had an impact on other areas of the directorate, which has had mixed

responses. However, there is an acceptance that the priorities had to change

- The Information Referral Tracker (IRT) manager is moving on secondment to support the Common Assessment Framework facilitator and to establish the children and families team and children's centres. This brings together the experiences from IRT and safeguarding and enables the manager to be more cross-cutting in focus and helps ensure that safeguarding cuts across all children's services
- Establishing a recruitment and retention strategy
- Using the Oxtown Borough Integrated Working Practices Toolkit, and adapting it to suit Midthorpe. This is being used successfully
- There has been a root and branch review of the LSCB – membership, organisation, and accountability. This has looked at the role of the members of the LSCB and it has been decided to appoint an independent chair. This is the model adopted successfully in Munbridge. There is now an interim chair from the health sector. Midthorpe is currently gathering job descriptions of LSCB chairs from across the country and will be advertising with a view to the new independent chair starting in the autumn
- Change in organisation of the ACCWs – moving them to the children's centres and increasing the number of qualified social workers in caseload
- Improvement in reporting to the LSCB. For example, they thought they were not getting any performance data. Actually they were, but not in an accessible format. There are now procedures in place to summarise that data to be more useful. There is a move to reorganise the whole way that information is presented to the LSCB.

## What could have been done differently?

- Involving all the senior managers across children's services from the start, ensuring that they all knew what was happening and that all their staff were aware
- Managing the second visit better – in some ways this was an opportunity missed as those who took part in the workshops were not really aware of what was expected of them and so they did not work as well as they could have
- Staying in silos is not helpful. It would have been possible to look at the capacity in safeguarding post-JAR but it was not initially seen as a problem

for everyone in children's services. Now that it is, ways of working have changed to be more integrated

- Communication in children's services has improved internally, but not yet with external partners.

### **Critical success factors**

- Having information relayed to senior managers about what is really going on for frontline staff
- Building up a two-way relationship with the other local authorities
- Learning from the experiences of two Beacon authorities – includes visits
- Having buy-in from the corporate centre – the chief executive was key to allocating extra resources in order to make the changes which were needed to improve
- 'Useful to talk to people who have grappled with the same things'
- Process managed by a credible organisation with an appropriate team for the circumstances.

### **What next?**

There are two more visits planned, in May (looking at culture change within the safeguarding team) and in the autumn.

- Exploring the possibility of mentoring the lead member for children's services and for the chair of scrutiny so as to learn from other councils how to integrate children's services into scrutiny, and how to ensure that safeguarding also runs through scrutiny appropriately
- There is a move to look at the role of the health sector – can they take on some of the cases? is some of the work more appropriately dealt with by health workers?
- Accountability is probably an issue for the council as a whole, not just children's services. It therefore helps the whole council if children's services can model improvements. This is the advantage of having the corporate centre on board throughout the process
- The LSCB has not before been fully linked in with either the council or the scrutiny process. This is why there is likely to be some mentoring for the scrutiny chair as well as for the lead member for children's services
- It is suspected that the council has yet to achieve change in perceptions of other agencies.

## **Hull city council – peer support panels**

### **Background**

Hull has a population of 250,000. Although it is a regional city and a major European port, the sudden demise of the local fishing industry 30 years ago led to prolonged economic decline. Although the city has made significant strides in regenerating the local economy in the past five years, Hull is still rated the 11th most deprived of England's 354 council areas and has high unemployment, with the annual claimant rate more than double the national average. Life expectancy for both men and women is below average.

### **Objective**

The city council has made major improvements in its performance in the past few years, and was taken out of special measures by the Government at the end of 2006.

However, the council did not see this as the end of its improvement journey. To improve its performance further, Hull decided to bring in external support and challenge, using a self-help model and drawing on expertise from credible practitioners within the local government sector.

It is now rated as a 3-star authority which is 'improving well', and has won a number of national awards for its performance in a range of services, including customer service, and was named Council of the Year by APSE in 2008.

### **Role of local government support**

The IDeA and the LGA set up a joint project in which experienced practitioners from within the local government sector were brought in to share their learning and expertise. The aim was to take a collaborative approach, offering advice and feedback which would support the drive for further, rapid improvement in Hull.

The steering group included Hull chief executive Kim Ryley and senior colleagues, as well as representatives from the LGA and the IDeA.

Five key service areas were targeted by this team at the request of the council, following its own self-assessment of its performance: housing, customer

service, worklessness, value for money and health inequality. Education and children's services was also given peer support, but in a different format, as the council wanted to give external specialists in the field the chance to talk to parents, teachers and children direct.

In all cases, the goal was to further improve performance and enhance strategic thinking and service development.

A peer advisory process was set up, drawing on the IDeA's experience in knowledge management techniques. A standing panel of peer advisors was put in place, supplemented by expert practitioners with relevant specialist knowledge in each service area covered. The IDeA selected these peers and chaired the advisory sessions.

The initial meeting took place in December 2007 and the three half-day workshops ran in February, May and July 2008.

The sessions were carefully structured, with the relevant council head of service starting off with a short presentation on the key points of their service's improvement journey, future plans, and challenges to be faced. Feedback sessions from peer advisors and group discussions followed, and an action plan was produced by the council team at the end of each session.

## Service areas

**Education.** The review was not an attempt to add another formal assessment, but rather to bring together a respected team to look at the way Hull has responded to the key issues of attainment and attendance at school, and to high levels of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). The team saw how strong leadership, with high quality partnership working, has been a key driver to improvement.

Outcome: The national profile of members of this review team lent weight to their comments, and provided a level of validation that has been important in giving the council the confidence to maintain its improved Ofsted assessment score.

**Housing.** The session coincided with the launch of Hull's latest housing strategy, and many of the council's new structures and approaches were validated as appropriate to the delivery of this.

Outcome: The peers helped council staff to enhance the service strategy by linking it more clearly to the full range of LAA outcomes, and encouraged engagement with the new Homes and Communities Agency.

**Customer service.** Issues discussed included the best practice approach to frontline service migration to the council's new customer service centres, and how to make systems integration work effectively.

Outcome: The panel discussion triggered a change of emphasis in development in this service area, encouraging a more streamlined service and stronger branding.

Suggested improvements included developing a single, integrated customer strategy and that use of the council's memorable call centre number could be part of Hull's 'brand'. Improved collating of customer service feedback would also mean that services could be tailored more accurately.

**Worklessness.** The session looked at the particular needs of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETS) and local employee partnerships with JobCentre Plus, as well as the council's corporate parenting initiative, in which 100 jobs were offered to 100 looked after young people.

Outcome: The session reaffirmed the principle that the council, with partners, needed to firmly lead on addressing the issue of worklessness, as reflected by the Houghton Review. As a result, significant amounts of Working Neighbourhood Funding (WNF), some £9.75m, has been deployed for projects to support people into work.

**Value for money.** This is a key priority for Hull, in terms of both boosting its CPA star rating and releasing capacity for investment in supporting its LAA priority areas.

Outcome: The panel focused specifically on responding more effectively to the way that 'use of resources' is assessed by the Audit Commission.

**Health inequality.** The session focused on defining 'wellbeing' in a way that all the local partners could relate to.

Outcome: The panel offered advice about effectively communicating health messages, as well as validating the approaches of the council and its partners to changing local lifestyle choices.

### **Conclusions**

In addition to giving Hull advice about further possible service improvements, this peer review process encouraged the council to recognise and celebrate its existing achievements and good practice.

In the light of its recent experience, Hull is actively involved at national level in shaping thinking about sector-led improvement and more effective alternatives to government intervention and inspection regimes.

This review has helped feed into that process, says Alistair Doxat-Pursar, head of improvement at the council. 'This process has enabled us to see what is working, where we can be more confident, and what still needs to be prioritised for further action.'

Chief executive Kim Ryley comments:

'For a relatively small input of time and energy, we gained significant and immediate benefits from access to credible practitioners, who understood our needs, the way we work, and how to make change happen on the ground.'

This was true because we were then able to 'shortcut' some of the learning involved, based on the experience of our peers, and move our improvement agenda on more quickly as a result. Equally important, however, was the boost the process gave the morale and confidence of our staff in tackling the next wave of change and improvement for the council and its partners.

In short, we found it a far more emotionally intelligent approach than our previous experience of government intervention, not least because we 'owned' the process.'

## **Liverpool city council**

### **Background**

The city of Liverpool is situated in the north west of England, within the metropolitan area of Merseyside. The Liverpool City Region incorporates the local authority areas of Knowsley, Sefton, St Helens, Halton and Wirral as well as the city of Liverpool itself. The total population is 436,100, making it the sixth largest city in the UK. Just over 10.8 per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic communities (BME).

This is the most deprived local authority in England, with high levels of unemployment and crime, as well as serious health inequalities. Its falling population (in 1945, around 800,000 people lived in the city) has led to a decline in the infrastructure of the area, as it was designed to serve a larger community. Forty five per cent of children and 29 per cent of over 60s live in households that are income deprived.

### **Challenges**

Following the CPA review in 2007, Liverpool City Council received 1-star. The Audit Commission CPA identified numerous weaknesses in the council's financial and corporate management arrangements and planning, together with the issue of member behaviour. However, the council was judged as 'performing well' or 'performing strongly' in five of the seven categories assessed.

In response, the recently appointed chief executive, Colin Hilton, and the leader of the council, Warren Bradley, decided to call upon the assistance of peers to develop an improvement agenda.

### **Role of local government support**

Jo Webb, IDeA Regional Associate and Neil Woods, Senior Improvement Manager, have been supporting the council, providing direct assistance and acting in the role of 'critical friend', as well as helping broker a range of support.

Ben Dolan, assistant chief executive of Liverpool CC, comments: 'One of the challenges facing the council was that despite a poor assessment of our use of resources arrangements, other CPA service block scores (with the exception of housing) indicated that the council was performing well in those areas.'

The IDeA worked with Chief Executive Colin Hilton, who commissioned a finance peer review which was undertaken in 2008. This included some experienced finance peers, led by Peter Rogers, ex-chief executive of Westminster LBC. It was a specific high profile project, aimed at improving the council's financial management.

'This review confirmed what our CPA assessment had identified and went further in identifying specific areas for improvement,' says Dolan. 'As a result the council has delivered a medium-term financial plan reflecting the council's corporate aims and priorities, increased provision for balances and reserves and has direct linkage to and support from the sustainable communities strategy and the local area agreement and is underpinned by our new corporate improvement programme.'

As part of the development of the 2009/10 budget, there was wide consultation with business and residents, including the innovative use of ICT in a budget game, in which citizens could make suggestions online and test their impact upon council tax levels to the overall budget position.

Liverpool made good use of peer reviews to undertake other specific pieces of work, such as a report on tourism which includes an analysis of the roles of the key regional and sub-regional partners. Elected members were supported by dedicated peers directly via initiatives such as ward walks and other development opportunities.

The Liverpool Democracy Commission, supported by the Leadership Centre, is also examining and consulting locally on the recommendations of the independent Councillors Commission. This is part of a national initiative in partnership with government and the main political parties.

Dolan comments: 'All of this was achieved during the same period that Liverpool delivered the most successful European Capital of Culture ever seen.'

The IDeA worked with the council to secure the support of various public sector partners including LGA, the RIEP's, the Local Government Leadership Centre, the Government Office North West and the Audit Commission.

One of the outcomes was to establish the Liverpool Strategic Innovation and Improvement Group (LSIIG) and the associated improvement plan. The LSIIG, chaired by Professor Michael Brown, vice chancellor of Liverpool John Moores University, developed an improvement and innovation plan which consists of three core strands: future ambition and delivery; finance and performance; and organisational culture and governance.

'It has been both a challenging and a rewarding experience, and we are grateful for the support, time and commitment given by the LSIIG partners and the leadership of Professor Michael Brown, as independent Chair,' says Dolan.

The council itself is directly responsible for delivery of the improvements required, and the implementation of the specific improvements recommended is closely monitored by the LSIIG.

The LSIIG was established with IDeA support, which helped facilitate its creation and establish its membership, including, crucially, the involvement of the RIEP's that also provided additional valuable support to the council. The council took its responsibility seriously, developing its own plan, with the LSIIG reviewing progress, making suggestions and supporting delivery.

Dolan comments: 'The LSIIG demonstrates clearly how the public sector can act together to provide mutual support to secure improvement for the benefit of communities.'

## **Outcomes**

There has been significant progress since this initiative, and the council was confident about achieving an improved final CPA score and direction of travel assessment. That confidence has seen an improvement to 2-star and 'Improving Well' with more to come from CAA.

The council intends to utilise its positive experience by transferring responsibility for improvement into its own continuous budget and performance improvement cycle and framework. There is also an exit strategy for the LSIIG, which will conclude its work in July 2009.

Liverpool now has three corporate aims: to grow the city's economy; empower our residents and develop our communities. These aims are underpinned by 10 priorities, including promoting enterprise and attracting development; developing first-rate education and training opportunities; and providing sustainable communities.

To meet these challenges, the council has re-aligned the relationship between executive members and executive director responsibilities. It has revised its governance arrangements, introduced a new business planning regime for 2009/10, made changes to the executive management team, implemented a new business unit structure and improved performance reporting at the neighbourhood level.

A new performance management framework has been introduced, and the change process will be communicated to the residents of the city – this is led by the chief executive, who will also have overall ownership of the improvement agenda. Liverpool has made significant progress and recognises that still more needs to be achieved to respond to the positive challenges provided by CAA.

Specific outcomes include: an improved CPA score and direction of travel judgement; resource allocation which concentrates on approved corporate aims; reduced numbers of council motions; new business planning arrangements which are robust and have been tested; improved communications within the council; a robust and resourced continuous corporate improvement programme; and an enhanced reputation for the council, both locally and nationally.

## Appendix 3

### List of attendees at the local government led improvement event

**Councillor Paul Bettison**

Leader, Bracknell Forest Borough Council

**Councillor William Brooks**

Head of Conservative Group Office and Portfolio Holder for Housing, London Borough of Ealing

**Councillor Ray Frost**

Deputy Leader, Teignbridge District Council

**Councillor Helen Holland**

Leader, Bristol City Council

**Councillor Richard Kemp**

Deputy Chair, LGA, Liverpool City Council

**Councillor Clyde Loakes**

Leader, London Borough of Waltham Forest

**Councillor Kenneth Lupton**

Leader, Stockton on Tees Borough Council

**Councillor David Parsons**

Chair of the Improvement Board and Leader of Leicestershire Council

**Councillor Dame Sally Powell**

London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

**Councillor Bryony Rudkin**

Suffolk County Council and Ipswich Borough Council

**Councillor Gerald Vernon**

**Jackson** Leader, Portsmouth City Council

**Councillor Peter Webb**

Leader, North Dorset District Council

**Councillor David Williams**

Cabinet Member for Communities, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames

**Mike Cuff**

Chief Executive, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

**Liz Goodall**

Chief Executive, North Dorset District Council

**Lucy de Groot CBE**

Executive Director, IDeA

**Colin Hilton**

Chief Executive, Liverpool City Council

**Paul Sheehan**

Chief Executive, Walsall Council

**Darra Singh**

Chief Executive, London Borough of Ealing

**Owen Williams**

Chief Executive, Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council

**Caroline Abrahams**

Programme Director, LGA Policy, LGA

**Sue Banks**

Assistant Director, West Midlands Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership

**Andrew Cozens**

Strategic Adviser, Children, Adults and Health Services, IDeA

**John Freeman**

Director of Children's Services, Dudley

**John Hayes**

Director, Services, IDeA

**Mandy James**

CAA Programme Development Manager, IDeA

**Annette Madden**

Interim Programme Director, Improvement and Performance, LGA

**Angela Page**

Policy Adviser, LGA

**Alastair Robertson**

Managing Director, Watford Borough Council

**Maggie Sullivan**

Head of Independent Group, LGA

**Dennis Skinner**

Regional Associate, National Co-ordination, IDeA

**Jo Webb**

Regional Associate, Yorkshire and the Humber, IDeA

**Nathan Yeowell**

Head of Labour Group Office, LGA



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*Local Government Association*

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

