

Sector led improvement evaluation: update

Purpose

For discussion

Summary

The final report of the LGA evaluation of sector led improvement is due to be published by May 2014. This paper outlines the plans for the final stages of the evaluation, as well as summarising the work that has been done to date.

Recommendation

That the report be noted.

Action

Key findings from the final evaluation report will be presented to the Improvement and Innovation Board at the March meeting, with the full report published by May 2014.

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Sector led improvement evaluation: update

Background

1. In November 2011, the LGA's Improvement Board approved the specification for an evaluation of sector-led improvement. The evaluation is running over the two year period until early 2014, with the main aim of understanding whether, in the context of reduced resources within the sector:
 - 1.1 the approach to sector-led improvement has the confidence of the sector and the government, and the trust of the public
 - 1.2 the sector has been able to strengthen local accountability
 - 1.3 the sector is adopting the sector-led improvement approach and continues to improve with a reduced burden of inspection, and in the absence of top down performance assessment
 - 1.4 the tools offered to the sector have had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself.
2. The baseline report was published in February 2013. It can be found here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>. The purpose of the baseline research was to establish an initial picture of the views of sector-led improvement. This provides the basis against which the final stage of the evaluation will assess the impact of the sector-led improvement approach. Details of the baseline research and the key findings from this are outlined in **Appendix A**, attached.

The final stage of the evaluation

3. Research for the final report is being conducted over the course of autumn and winter 2013, and early 2014. Key findings will be available for the Improvement and Innovation Board in March 2014 and the full final report will be published by May 2014. Research for the final report will generally involve repeating the baseline research, to enable an assessment of the progress of sector-led improvement over the period. Content will include:
 - 3.1 a 'perceptions audit' comprising in depth interviews with key stakeholders, including civil servants and regulators
 - 3.2 results of quarterly polling of 1,000 British residents to track levels of trust in local government and measures associated with local accountability
 - 3.3 a survey of heads of policy and performance
 - 3.4 a 'perceptions survey', conducted via telephone, of chief executives, lead members and chairs of scrutiny
 - 3.5 the final rounds of the evaluation of peer challenge

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- 3.6 data analysis, which will provide a quantitative assessment of sector performance over time
- 3.7 light touch evaluations and analysis of usage statistics for the offers of support, including Knowledge Hub, LG Inform, change of control support, leadership support and YouChoose.
- 4. In addition, the LGA has commissioned UK Research and Consulting Services Ltd (RCS) to carry out a study into the relative effectiveness of sector-led improvement and government-led interventions and to provide a comparative analysis. The RCS team (Prof Tim Allen, Prof Steve Martin, Dr Clive Grace and Mike Bennett) are currently gathering evidence from a number of sources including interviews with senior LGA councillors and officers, civil servants and representatives of other agencies (for example Ofsted). They will also produce a set of case studies of up to three individual councils. The project was commissioned in September of this year and a final report will be ready by early January 2014.

Service specific evaluation

- 5. In addition to the evaluation of the corporate sector-led improvement offer, separate evaluation activity is being undertaken to look at sector-led improvement in children's services, adult social care, health and fire. To ensure a comprehensive assessment of sector-led improvement as a whole, the corporate evaluation will draw on the findings of these where appropriate.
- 6. The evaluation activity underway in these service areas is summarised below.
- 7. Adult social care
 - 7.1 A survey of lead members for adult social care and a separate survey of directors for adult social care will be conducted during autumn/winter 2013. This will look at views of and the impact of sector-led improvement in adult social care.
 - 7.2 The LGA research team will be conducting an evaluation of the national and local data reports on adult social care, which have been made available to councils.
 - 7.3 An evaluation of pilot activity to collect and share quarterly performance data will be undertaken in January 2013. This will be led by the LGA research team.
 - 7.4 A light touch evaluation of the 'Use of Resources' self-assessment pilot is being conducted by Rachel Ayling (the consultant who has been commissioned to work on these pilots).
 - 7.5 A national analysis and overview of local accounts by Caroline Marsh Management Solutions.
 - 7.6 Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care (TEASC) plans to undertake evaluation of its work on peer challenge and support, and will be developing a plan for this during the autumn, with results expected by March 2014. The LGA research team are assisting with this.

8. Children's services

8.1 A survey of lead members for children's services and a separate survey of directors for children's services is planned to be conducted late in 2013/early 2014.

8.2 Three pieces of further evaluation activity have already been published, however aside from the surveys mentioned in the bullet above no further evaluation activity is currently planned, following the withdrawal of Children's Improvement Board (CIB) funding. The published evaluations are:

8.2.1 Evaluation of the Early Adopter Sector Led Improvement Programme pilots - http://www.local.gov.uk/web/quest/research-education/-/journal_content/56/10171/3489923/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

8.2.2 The longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews - http://www.local.gov.uk/web/quest/research-education/-/journal_content/56/10171/3892624/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

8.2.3 Evaluation of the sector-led peer challenge programme 2012/13 - http://www.local.gov.uk/web/quest/research-education/-/journal_content/56/10171/3961621/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

9. Health

9.1 Tendering for an overall evaluation of the Health and Wellbeing System Improvement Support Programme and Partnership has recently closed, and the contract has been awarded. The deadline for delivery of the evaluation report is 31 March 2014.

9.2 Shared Intelligence have recently completed a study of four pilot health and wellbeing peer challenges to establish whether there are any emerging lessons and themes – this will help the programme in discussions on future development work and funding.

10. Fire

10.1 An evaluation of fire peer challenge is currently being undertaken by Cardiff University, and a draft report is due by the end of 2013.

Appendix A: Baseline research and key findings

The individual elements of research included in the baseline report were:

1. the first round of the 'perceptions audit', comprising ten in depth interviews with key stakeholders in sector-led improvement (including regulators and civil servants)
2. results of quarterly polling of 1,000 British residents to track levels of trust in local government and measures associated with local accountability
3. the first survey of heads of policy and performance
4. an evaluation of peer challenge
5. some small scale evaluations and analysis of usage statistics for some of the offers of support, particularly Knowledge Hub, LG Inform, Leadership Academy and YouChoose.

Some additional baseline research has also been conducted with different groups and we are in the process of publishing this. It includes:

6. the first round of a 'perceptions survey', conducted via telephone, of chief executives, lead members and chairs of scrutiny
7. the first round of an online survey of lead members for adult social care and a separate survey of directors for adult social care, looking at TEASC
8. the first round of an online survey of lead members for children's services and a separate survey of directors for children's services, looking at CIB
9. some light touch evaluation of Knowledge Hub and YouChoose.

Key messages from the baseline stage

For each of the evaluation objectives, the key findings from the baseline research are summarised below. Generally, the baseline stage was too soon to draw conclusions on progress: these findings provide an initial picture against which the final evaluation report will assess progress.

Does the approach to sector-led improvement have the confidence of the sector and the government, and the trust of the public?

Key stakeholders who were interviewed as part of the perceptions audit in July 2012 (including senior civil servants and regulators) were generally positive about sector-led improvement. The general view was that although implementation appeared to get off to a slow start, the pace of development was picking up.

In terms of awareness of the sector-led improvement approach, the surveys that have been conducted to date reveal:

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- Just over half (59 per cent) of respondents to the survey of heads of policy and performance (conducted June 2012) had heard a lot or a moderate amount about the approach.
- In the 'perceptions survey' conducted in November 2012, chief executives were significantly more likely than those in other roles to have heard a lot or a moderate amount about sector-led improvement (90 per cent compared with 45 per cent of leaders and 35 per cent of chairs of scrutiny).

Those who were aware of the sector-led improvement approach were supportive. Both surveys asked all those who had heard at least a little whether they agreed or disagreed that it is the right approach in the current context:

- Seventy five per cent of heads of policy and performance agreed or strongly agreed.
- Eighty six per cent of chief executives agreed or strongly agreed, and the majority of leaders and chairs of scrutiny also agreed with the approach – in both cases just under two thirds said this (63 per cent of leaders and 65 per cent of chairs of scrutiny).

Public polling has also been undertaken to monitor the impact of sector-led improvement on public views of councils. This has found that levels of public trust in councils have been maintained since the first round of polling in September 2012, when 61 per cent said that they trust their council a great deal or a fair amount – the most recent figure (July 2013) is also 61 per cent.

Whilst many factors will impact on levels of trust in councils, this shows that, to date, the removal of much of the top down performance management and assessments has not had a negative impact in this regard.

Has the sector been able to strengthen local accountability?

The baseline stages were too early to make a judgement on this, however respondents to the perceptions survey were positive about accountability in their authority, with 96 per cent of both chief executives and leaders either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "local accountability is strong in my authority". Chairs of scrutiny were still positive, but slightly less so, with 80 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Further, the earlier survey of heads of policy and performance showed high levels of engagement and accountability activities such as consulting on proposals to get feedback and ideas (91 per cent were doing this) and using social media to communicate with residents (84 per cent). The survey also identified aspiration for improvement; 70 per cent of respondents said that their authority aspired to a higher level of local accountability and engagement with residents than they are currently achieving.

The public polling shows that over the last few months, councils have maintained performance on three indicators which, taken together, give an insight in to levels of local accountability across the sector:

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- In the July 2013 poll, two thirds of respondents (66 per cent) said that their council keeps residents very or fairly well informed about the services and benefits it provides. This is broadly consistent with the levels seen in previous rounds of polling.
- There has also been very little change in the extent to which respondents are satisfied with the way their local council runs things. In July, 72 per cent were very or fairly satisfied – the same level as observed in September 2012.
- In July 2013, 63 per cent said that their council acts on the concerns of local residents a fair amount or a great deal – similar to the 62 per cent who said this in September 2012.

Is the sector adopting the sector-led improvement approach and continuing to improve?¹

Respondents to the ‘perceptions survey’ were positive about improvement work in their own authorities. Ninety eight per cent of both chief executives and leaders either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my authority is making advances in driving improvement”. Chairs of scrutiny were slightly less positive, but levels of agreement were still high, with 78 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing.

A high level of confidence was also seen in the survey of heads of policy and performance, when 95 per cent of respondents were confident either to a great or a moderate extent that their own authority has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continually improve. Eighty three per cent thought this for the sector.

The baseline stage was too early to judge whether this is happening in practice; the final stage of the evaluation will draw on updated surveys and an analysis of performance data to judge progress.

Have the tools offered to the sector had a positive impact on the sector’s capacity to improve itself?

Looking at awareness of the different offers, in the perceptions survey:

- The highest level of awareness amongst chief executives was of the provision of a corporate peer challenge at no cost (98 per cent had heard at least a little about this), followed by the Knowledge Hub (90 per cent).
- Leaders were most commonly aware of the provision of one subsidised place on the LGA's Leadership Academy (74 per cent), followed by corporate peer challenge (70 per cent).

¹ Please note that this evaluation defines improvement as including maintenance of service levels or service user outcomes in the face of a reduction in resources, as this requires an increase in productivity.

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- The two offers which chairs of scrutiny were most aware of were the commitment to work with local authorities to develop local accountability tools (51 per cent) and supporting member and officer networks (51 per cent).
- The earlier survey of heads of policy and performance revealed high levels of awareness of the offers amongst this group – for example 84 per cent were aware of peer challenge and 82 per cent were aware of the Knowledge Hub.

Those respondents who had some awareness of the LGA's approach to sector-led improvement were fairly positive about the likely impact of the support and resources on offer on both their own authority's capacity and the sector's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

- Seventy six per cent of chief executives, 60 per cent of leaders and 58 per cent of chairs of scrutiny thought that the support and resources offered will have a great or moderate positive impact on their authority.
- Eighty two per cent of chief executives, 80 per cent of leaders and 66 per cent of chairs of scrutiny thought that the support and resources offered will have a great or moderate positive impact on the sector more generally.
- In the survey of heads of policy and performance, around two thirds of respondents thought that there will be a great or moderate positive impact both on their authority (66 per cent) and the sector (67 per cent).