

## **Improvement Programme Board – report from Cllr David Parsons CBE (Chairman)**

1. The January meeting of the Improvement Programme Board is being held in the County Hall in Preston, Lancashire. Following the Board meeting, leaders of councils in the North West have been invited to discuss the challenges they face and what the Local Government Group can do to support them.
2. The Board Away Day on 17 November 2010, which was held in the Guildhall in the City of London, gave members the opportunity to have a detailed discussion on responses to the consultation by the LG Group on **sector led regulation and improvement**.
3. The responses to the consultation were overwhelmingly positive about the suggested approach. In particular there was strong support for the overall principles - councils are responsible for their own performance and that councils have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole. The responses supported the suggestion that the LG Group would provide tools to support them as long as these were made available for councils to use as and when required and were not mandatory. Member councils recognised that we have to find some way of managing the risk for the sector as a whole when councils are facing difficulties. But they were also clear that the LG Group should not become some sort of sector owned inspectorate.
4. The January meeting of the Board will be asked to comment on and approve the response back to the sector which will set out the new approach to sector led regulation and improvement, which will come into effect from April 2011. Work is underway with the sector to refine the tools that the LG group are making available to ensure that they are what councils want and can be adapted where necessary to local circumstances.
5. An LG Group national conference, '**productive services, productive places**' chaired by Cllr Parsons, was held at Local Government House on 3 December 2010. The conference provided an opportunity to share initial learning from the productivity programme work-streams and methods for councils to use to improve productivity. A web resource of '100 tried and tested' ways councils can cut costs and respond to the challenge posed by the spending review was developed in time for the conference.
6. Now that the first phase of identifying good practice to support local productivity is drawing to a close, the next few months will see a focus on supporting more radical options which deliver larger impacts over a longer time frame, including developing measures to help councils develop their own performance and make local choices which are right for their areas.

7. CLG has now published, for consultation, a draft list of all the **data returns and surveys** that Government requires of local government. The deadline for responses is 4 February and the final list will take effect from April 2011. Whilst we welcome the publication of the list no significant reductions in data burdens have yet been made. The LG group will be keen to use the consultation process to challenge government about the need for so many data returns.
8. The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee have initiated an inquiry into the future arrangements in all the areas that previously fell within the responsibility of the **Audit Commission**. In our evidence to the inquiry, the LGA has argued that future arrangements need to be set within the context of the Government's approach to transparency and stronger local, rather than national, accountability. We welcome the proposals for councils to appoint their own auditors but suggest that a simpler and more easily understandable framework for published accounts is required. We accept the need for appropriate safeguards to preserve the independence of audit but caution that the new approach to audit should not become over regulated and prescribed through Government guidance. The scope of audit should in future be more tightly focussed around the accuracy of the financial statements and issues of probity.
9. The Local Government Group Annual Improvement and Innovation conference "**Delivering public services in challenging times**" is being held on Tuesday 22 March 2011, at the Leeds Hilton Hotel. There are a number of reduced rate places available for elected councillors.

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