

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

1. The March meeting of the Improvement Programme Board is being held in Leeds on 21 March, to coincide with the LG Group Improvement and Innovation Conference on 22 March. Following the Board meeting, members will have the opportunity to visit some practical examples of improvement underway in the city.
2. The LG Group's proposals for self regulation published last month in our paper entitled '**Taking the Lead**' will form a significant part of the programme at the Leeds conference. The launch of 'Taking the Lead' follows a lengthy period of consultation and discussion with the local government sector. It sets out a coherent position on how self regulation will be taken forward and aims to help local authorities strengthen their accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services.
3. The seven point offer is designed to help local authorities capitalise on the LG Group's successful campaign for the £2bn burden of central government inspections to be drastically reduced. 'Taking the Lead' offers a range of free-of-charge local accountability tools to help councils and other local authorities further improve the way they gather and respond to feedback from residents, partners and community groups.
4. The offer also includes a number of new tools local authorities can use to explore how effectively they are delivering services, including a "Peer Challenge" which will also be free of charge. It will be carried out by a mixture of local authority leaders, chief executives and directors of finance, along with people from a range of organisations including the third sector and business communities.
5. The March Board meeting will also be discussing the next phase of the local productivity programme, and receiving a report on support from the LG Group for local innovation.
6. A key part of the Local Government Group's package of support to councils, **Knowledge Hub** is a new web platform for local government, offering a suite of free on-line software and services. A Knowledge Hub conference was held at LG House on 1 March 2011, chaired by Cllr Shortland, Vice Chair of the Board. The event was a great success and explored the potential of the new on-line portal and social media to allow people to share data, solve problems and to generate new ideas and improve services.

7. The **Audit Commission** has announced a further reduction in fees for 2011/12, following the LGA's call for them to give back the surplus funds amassed from charging councils for audit and inspection. The Commission has agreed, subject to affordability, to make additional rebates of up to £7.2 million (8 per cent) in the next financial year. This means all audited bodies will see a significant net reduction in fees compared to 2010/11. The Commission is committed to delivering further reductions of up to 15% in 2012/13.
8. Cllr Jill Shortland, Vice Chair of the Board and Cllr Robert Light gave oral evidence to the CLG Select Committee on arrangements for current Audit Commission activities on 7 March 2011, which was a good opportunity to promote the LG Group's sector self regulation proposals and the active support the group is providing to councils.
9. Last Autumn Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, announced the replacement of the National Indicator Set with a **single comprehensive list of all the data returns** central government expects local government to provide. In our response to the consultation on the proposed list, the LGA welcomed the ambition but called for a more fundamental debate about the nature of accountability and what it is appropriate to report nationally and locally. We suggested a list of data returns (developed with input from the sector-owned Challenge Group) that should be deleted immediately in order to reduce the reporting burden on councils. A full copy of the response is available on the LGA website.
10. A separate consultation exercise on **Government Departmental Business Plans** has also raised concerns about the risk of reintroducing a performance regime for local government. We have argued that the indicators in the Plans should not be used to manage council performance. The lack of effective consultation and engagement with the local government sector also in our view represents a missed opportunity to develop a shared approach to indicators and to align with those that councils want to adopt and collect through the LG Group's work with councils on data and transparency.
11. In order to help enable members to attend the Leeds Improvement and Innovation Conference on 22 March, a number of places are available for councillors on a subsidised basis. Further details are available here: www.local.gov.uk/events

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