

LGA Scrutiny Panel

Review of LGA Member Structures

Report of the Panel

Executive Summary

1. The Local Government Association introduced a new member structure in the summer of 2004, replacing a system of 19 executives and panels with one consisting of 6 Boards, 4 Panels and a number of limited duration task groups. The Scrutiny Panel has examined the experience of members in operating the new board structure; and had separately been looking at how member task groups had been working.
2. In establishing the new structure, the LGA recognised that it was both a national lobbying organisation and a representative body for its member authorities, and that “any member structure for the LGA needs to provide for both of these elements”.
3. The strategy of “Doing less, but better”, and putting members at the forefront of relations with government has been a bold one. It has placed a much greater emphasis than in the past on the LGA as a lobbying organisation. To be more successful at lobbying, the LGA has decided to pick its targets; and the more focussed approach being undertaken by boards is a direct result of this change of emphasis.
4. The evidence which the Panel has heard clearly shows that the LGA is enjoying an increased impact in its lobbying role, primarily through its senior members on the LGA Executive and boards. However, in altering the traditional balance between its roles as a lobbying and as a representative organisation, it has, perhaps inevitably, increased the tension between the two roles.
5. The central findings of the Panel’s work have been that
 - The new structure of Boards has been in the main successful in achieving the principal objective of the re-organisation – becoming more effective in influencing central government. A range of successes have been reported to the Panel, but particularly in relation to finance and the improvement agenda.
 - However, there are clear signs that the obverse of the gains in lobbying effectiveness has been a worrying worsening of the general engagement with the wider membership.

- The arrangements put in place to ensure the continued involvement of the wider membership have not worked well. Member Task Groups, whilst having some individual successes, have not in general been able to take up the engagement task. Further consideration needs to be given to ways of keeping the wider membership both supportive of the strategic approach and engaged in policy discussion and development.

6 So whilst there does not appear a case for any fundamental revision to the basic member structure, attention does need to be given to those elements of the structure which appear to be working less well, and which need to deliver an effective engagement with the wider membership.

7. The Panel is making the following recommendations in relation to the board structure (and related issues); member task groups; and the engagement of the wider membership:

The Board Structure

1. More needs to be done by the Association to convince both board members and the wider membership of authorities of the benefits of “Doing less, but better”.
2. The LGA Executive should ask itself whether it had adequate arrangements in place for oversight of the LGA business plan.
3. The remits of the Environment and Regeneration Boards should be revisited to consider whether they may be too wide, and if so, whether an additional board may be required.
4. The lead member approach to Boards’ remits should be revisited as a means of better engaging the ordinary board member and taking pressure off office holders;
5. Consideration should be given to additional support and development for chairs and office holders, if requested.
6. Board and task group member induction needs to be improved.
7. The LGA allowances system should reflect any increased responsibilities undertaken by board members
8. The allowances review should also consider the provision of allowances for substitute members when they are attending a board in the place of a board member; and groups should be asked to consider providing support for substitutes attending board meetings at their invitation as observers.
9. Consideration should be given to the potential benefits of lobbying opposition MPs and peers.

Member Task Groups

10. Boards should still make use of member task groups to undertake time – limited tasks on their behalf
11. Consideration should be given to the sorts of tasks best suited to such time – limited investigations
12. An urgent review of the process for the establishment of task groups be undertaken to ensure that they are established in a shorter time span, including whether the LGA Executive really needs to continue to approve formally the establishment of task groups.

Engaging the wider membership

13. The benefits of member groupings below the boards to cater for the policy development of specific service interests should be explored.
14. Much more needs to be done to devise, and publicise, alternative, and convincing ways of handling traditional policy areas outside the board model, whether through more policy review groups; the central bodies; professional officer advisory networks or other means. Advice from the professional officer advisory networks could also be available to Boards, as required.

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1. Introduction

Two working groups of the Panel have been examining separate elements of the new member structure:

- One, chaired by Cllr Malcolm Blanksby, Chair of the Panel, was asked by the LGA Executive to review the operation of the LGA boards, since their inception in

September 2004, with reference to the experience of board chairs and other members in their operation.

- A second, chaired by Cllr Trevor Jones OBE, Vice Chair of the Panel, has been looking at member task groups – their establishment, member views on their operation, and links with the rest of the member structure.

A full list of the members of the two working groups is annexed to this report.

2. Background

2.1 The LGA introduced a new member structure in the summer of 2004. The central change was the replacement of a system of 19 executives and panels with 6 Boards, 4 Panels and a number of limited duration task groups. The LGA consulted widely with its membership in the spring of 2004. In that consultation document, it was emphasised that the structural proposals arose directly from the results of a large-scale membership survey and perceptions audit, whose central messages were that the LGA needed to:

- Set the agenda, rather than follow it;
- Do less, but do it better
- Make better use of members both at the LGA, and more widely in presenting the local government case

2.2 Amongst the requirements of the new structure was that it:

- Placed members at the forefront of policy formulation;
- Gave them the lead role in relations with government and others;
- Provided a coherent structure for managing the business process

The consultation recognised that the LGA was both a national lobbying organisation and a representative body for its member authorities, and that “any member structure for the LGA needs to provide for both of these elements”.

2.3 Boards were seen as the means to provide more effective relations with government. The consultation paper said:

“The LGA is a lobbying organisation and positive relations with government and others are crucial to its success. We want members to be at the forefront of these relationships. The overlapping responsibilities of executives, and lack of clarity on lead roles have made it harder for members to develop as recognised spokespeople for local government on specific issues and to develop and maintain the outside relationships vital to arguing the local government case”.

2.4 Task Groups were to be a means of enabling leading members in authorities to become involved in the work of the LGA without the time commitment required of membership of the permanent member structure. “The member task groups are time limited and more

focussed in subject matterand should provide an opportunity for more members to be involved in one-off projects of particular interest to them and their authorities.”

2.5 The consultation paper also referred to the existing Rural and Urban Commissions and existing policy review groups as providing “a successful model for developing a variety of arrangements for involving the wider membership in policy formulation and discussion; and providing channels of communications between the LGA and member authorities”. It was proposed that the new boards should each have one or more policy review groups (PRG) attached to it – either relating to the whole remit of the board; or more focussed around a function or activity, as each board decided. These were seen as both policy forums and as wider sounding boards for the work of the member task groups for each board.

2.6 However, the PRG proposal received a mixed response, and, consequently, the General Assembly agreed that PRGs should not be a requirement of the structure, but that Boards be asked to look at ways of developing two -way channels of communication with the wider membership. The paper to the General Assembly commented .. “ It may well be that service interests, such as transport or housing, might particularly want to explore with the relevant board appropriate ways of meeting together. These might include PRGs, based on the whole or part, of a board’s remit, and service specific group leader briefings, using the success of the group leaders’ briefings as a model.” In the event only the Strategy and Finance PRG and Rural PRG are presently in existence.

3. The work of the Scrutiny Panel member groups

3.1 The issues arising from the work of the two groups are set out in the following sections. Whilst the working groups have been examining separate parts of the member structure, a range of linkages have emerged, both around the member structure and with the outside world, particularly the wider LGA membership. Because of the inter-relation of these issues, the report then brings these strands of work together in a common set of conclusions, in section 6.

4. Review of the Board Structure

4.1 The working group has held 6 roundtable discussions with chairs, office holders, members and substitutes on Boards, and a further session with LGA Programme Directors. These sessions have involved 28 members of Boards – not all Chairs or other office holders have been interviewed. Some members of the working group have also interviewed their group leader. A set of questions was also sent to those Chairs and office holders who were unable to attend a roundtable discussion.

(a) Reactions to the new structure

4.2 There was a general awareness amongst interviewees as to the reasons why the LGA had moved to its new member structure – the need to focus on a smaller number of policy priorities, and by so doing improve the Association’s lobbying performance; i.e the “Doing Less, But Better” approach, outlined in the original consultation. However, such awareness of the strategic roots of the structure did not universally translate into a wholehearted endorsement of all aspects of the new structure.

4.3 In relation to the board system, views expressed ranged from an enthusiastic endorsement as an improvement over the former system of executives; through a more generalised support in principle, with an acceptance that the system was still evolving; through to a minority in opposition (sometimes longstanding) to the new arrangements.

4.4 Enthusiasm tended to be highest amongst the Chairs and office holders of the Boards, whilst concerns were more likely to be expressed by ordinary Board members. These concerns centred around perceptions of an individual’s role in the structure; the impact of the “Doing Less Better” approach on the priorities of the Boards – and on the LGA as a whole; and the perception of the benefits of the new arrangements for the wider membership.

4.5 The Panel accepts that these perceptions cannot be presented as a definitive view of all Board members, but they do provide a snapshot of a fairly representative cross section of opinion. The sections below explore these perceptions, and provide some broad conclusions for the LGA to examine.

(b) Views of Chairs and Office holders

4.6 Chairs and office holders generally pointed to the benefits of the new system. The gains identified were:

- More focussed policy objectives
- More informed debate around issues
- A more collegiate, cross-party approach to business, leading more effectively to a consensual approach
- And as a result, greater impact with partners, especially government, on policy priorities

Chairs and office holders were able to point to a range of policy successes for their boards – see the section below on lobbying.

4.7 There was some concern expressed at the wide remit of some Boards (particularly the Environment and Regeneration Boards), which had caused particularly hard choices to be made in refining down a small set of policy priorities – and which may have contributed to some discontent amongst certain Board members.

4.8 The Chairs of Boards now have a higher profile and with it has come an increased time commitment for them – and to a lesser extent, for board office holders. This appears a particular issue for Boards with a wider remit. The distribution of lead member responsibilities for certain policy portfolios both amongst the office holders of these boards – and in some

cases to the wider board – has been tried, but with mixed success. (See section (c) below)

4.9 Some chairs mentioned the need for more support for themselves, both administratively and in developing skills (media training etc)

(c) Views of Board members and substitutes

4.10 There was a wider range of views on the merits of the board system amongst ordinary board members and substitutes. There was a consensus that the system had produced results for all boards, and particularly in some high profile policy areas – LG finance and improvement issues were usually cited. However, concerns centred on:

- the role of ordinary members and substitutes; and
- the remits of Boards and the implications of their more focussed approach;
- the lack of a professional advisory structure in support of the boards.

The role of ordinary members and substitutes

4.11 Whilst some ordinary members accepted that the system was still bedding in and that it was understandable that the chairs and office holders would have a substantial role, there was a general concern that ordinary board members were not used enough. Some felt quite detached, even disengaged, from the work of their board. In some boards, lead members for certain policy areas had been appointed as a way of both involving the wider board membership and to cope with a wide remit. The Environment Board, for example, appointed lead members for specific policy areas, from all groups, (who were known as Group spokespersons on the specific policy area). Whilst this approach was seen as having some potential, difficulties cited were:

- The lead members did not have delegated responsibility for these policy areas
- There was no policy or administrative support for these roles
- The allowance for an ordinary board member undertaking such lead member responsibilities did not reflect these additional responsibilities, nor the resulting increased time commitment

4.12 Substitute members of boards felt particularly distant from the on-going work of boards. Whilst all received board papers regularly, and the groups usually invited their substitute members to attend their pre-board group meetings, it was noted that such attendance was not supported by any assistance from the LGA allowance scheme. Indeed, allowances were not available for substitute members even when they were called upon to attend a board meeting, in the place of a board member. There may be some merit in groups considering the advantages for continuity and member development in substitutes being

invited as a matter of course to attend board meetings, although there may be some logistical implications for the Association in meeting room capacities.

The remits of boards and the implications of a more focussed approach

4.13 Some board members expressed concern about the implications of the more focussed policy priority approach of certain Boards for the active consideration by the LGA of the wider range of policy issues which had been considered under the former arrangements. These were often referred to by interviewees as “the traditional bread and butter issues”; or the “here and now” issues. In their view, policy issues were being “lost” to serious consideration by the boards, which had previously been considered by the former executives. Examples of policy areas cited were social exclusion; transport and aspects of planning policy.

4.14 These concerns reflect the tensions between the “Doing less, but better” approach and pursuing a wider, more traditional, agenda. They are particularly evident in those boards with the widest remit, and which subsumed a larger number of executives from the previous arrangements. Boards with a narrower focus appear more cohesive. The Panel formed the view that, to some extent, the concerns voiced at the board structure and, in particular the wide remit of some boards were expressions of a continuing opposition not just to the new structure, but also to the strategic choice underlying the “Doing less, but better” approach. This approach implies that some policy areas will have priority over others – that is a political choice, and will produce opposition, often directed at the structure supporting the policy, rather than the underlying policy itself. It also reflects loss of influence for some individuals and a need for some sort of forum to take forward policy discussions in areas not within a board’s existing priorities. However, concern at the wide remit of the Environment and Regeneration Boards was also expressed by members who were generally supportive of the board model.

4.15 The possibility that a prioritising of policy areas would cause tensions was recognised by the LGA in its consultation paper, which proposed that certain policy areas may need to be handled in different ways outside the board structure. The original consultation paper proposed that there should be a policy review group for each board. This proposal was not taken forward by the General Assembly, but in amending this aspect, the General Assembly commented: “ *It may well be that service interests, such as transport or housing, might particularly want to explore with the relevant board appropriate ways of meeting together. These might include PRGs, based on the whole or part, of a board’s remit, and service specific group leader briefings, using the success of the group leaders’ briefings as a model.*”

4.16 Where Board members were generally supportive of the new member arrangements, they tended to like the more focussed nature of Board agendas. There did not seem to be any enthusiasm to return to the long agendas which were often a feature of the old executives. The more focussed agenda were seen as a natural consequence of a more focussed set of policy priorities for each board. There was some concern that instances of an over – reliance on presentations by external speakers tended to crowd out policy discussions by board members themselves.

A professional advisory structure

4.17 Members expressing concern at the remits of some boards also referred to the lack of a professional advisory structure linked to the member arrangements, upon which members could draw. The absence of formal advisors to Boards was not a recent feature accompanying the new member arrangements, as the former Executives did not generally appoint advisers. It is, though, in marked contrast to the previous Associations, which relied heavily on professional assistance from very senior serving local government officers.

4.18 Evidence from the programme director session suggested that there were some advisory arrangements in place (for example, via the planning officers society), but that these networks would need to be expanded, if the Association were to be able to concentrate on the smaller number of significant policy priorities envisaged by the “Doing less, but better” approach. Programme Directors envisaged that such advisory networks were necessary to handle policy issues not falling within the Boards’ priorities.

4.19 The Panel noted that the LGA is currently undertaking, with its partner central bodies, a series of change initiatives designed to facilitate much closer working. Internally, the LGA is undergoing quite radical staff re-organisations, to bring the staffing profile into line with the “Doing less, but better” approach. This will involve a reduction in the numbers of in-house policy staff to release funds for buying in external expertise in support of its policy priorities. As a consequence, the LGA has recognised the need to develop external advisory networks to undertake some more traditional advisory work on behalf of the LGA.

(d) Lobbying / relations with Government

4.20 Most board members saw improvements in the LGA’s lobbying performance – and particularly in its relationship with ministers as the most significant gain from the new arrangements. This appears true also for those who were less supportive of the board model in general. Particular areas of success were seen as the finance negotiations, and the whole improvement and inspection regime agenda. Other examples mentioned were adult social care; the Children’s Bill and the Public Health White Paper.

4.21 A more focussed agenda for boards and a higher profile for the boards’ chairs and office holders, together with improved performance by the LGA’s public relations and media team were mentioned as contributing to these perceived successes. The wider acceptance amongst groups of the revised political protocol on delegations, which has resulted in smaller delegations to ministers, was also seen as contributing to lobbying successes.

4.22 But the success of chairs and office holders in this regard were also seen as a contributory factor in the ordinary board member feeling less involved than expected – to some extent, this was understood as “Ministers will always want to see the top person...”.

4.23 However, those less supportive of the model pointed to the extent to which other issues from local government’s wider agenda were no longer being raised directly with ministers, whereas they had been in the past. There were also claims that, although

ministerial contacts on the focussed agenda of boards were yielding results, contacts at official level were fewer. Concerns were expressed that there was not enough pro-active lobbying of members of parliament and peers, and that there appeared some defensiveness within the organisation on lobbying opposition MPs.

(e) The LGA Executive, the boards and the business plan

4.24 There was some evidence of tensions between boards and the LGA Executive, particularly in the immediate post – General Election period. There were concerns that the role of boards may have been circumvented by the LGA Executive in relation to high – profile functional areas – particularly education. However, this was seen as an evolving relationship, with more recent evidence of joint lobbying of ministers by LGA Executive and board office holders.

4.25 Some tension was also seen in the role of board chairs on the LGA Executive between being part of the corporate approach and being representatives of their board. Again this relationship was seen as evolving, and the principle of board chair representation on the Executive was seen as an important development.

4.26 The working group sought views on how far board members were at the forefront in policy formulation, and more specifically, on their understanding of the LGA's business planning process and the formulation of the small number of objectives from each board which made up the LGA business plan. There were mixed messages here.

4.27 Many board members, and all office holders, interviewed were clear that the board members were able to set their own priorities for incorporation in the business plan. Some emphasised the difficulties they had experienced in refining down a wide policy agenda into a small number of priorities, but there was no suggestion that the content of the priorities were imposed upon them.

4.28 However, those who were less supportive of the board model tended to point to the process of formulating a small number of board priorities as central to their concerns that a range of previously priority policy areas were dropping off the LGA agenda. This feeling was more prevalent amongst members of boards with a particularly wide remit. Boards with a more focussed remit, such as the Improvement Board, appeared not to find this process so contentious.

4.29 Whilst not all those interviewed were sure about the formal relationship between the Boards and the LGA Executive in relation to the plan, the consensus was that the LGA Executive needed to monitor it as a whole following the development of specific priorities by Boards. However, the Panel found no evidence that the LGA Executive was monitoring or directing the business plan through the year, once boards' priorities had been agreed.

(g) Relations with the Association's wider membership

4.30 Whilst those interviewed expressed a general hope that the wider membership would appreciate the Association's role in making improvements in those policy areas which it regarded as priorities – finance; the improvement regime etc, – there was concern that within the wider membership of the Association, there was either a lack of understanding of, or acceptance of the implications of the “Doing less, but better” approach. This concern was particularly expressed in relation to the Environment and Regeneration Board policy areas, where reference was made, for example, to the threat by Passenger Transport Authorities to leave the LGA. However, reference was also made to the fear that some districts were coming to the view that the LGA's priorities did not adequately reflect their own. There could be serious implications for the LGA as a member organisation if the wider membership were to become detached from the strategic approach being taken by the LGA at national level.

4.31 This concern was reinforced for interviewees by the impression that there was less actual engagement with the wider membership through the new arrangements. In part this concern was expressed as a perception that fewer councillors were being involved in the work of the Association. The following section looks at the work of member task groups, which were intended to be the main mechanism for member involvement outside the board structure. That section suggests that member task groups were not, by themselves, providing the mechanism for involving more members as originally envisaged.

4.32 The Panel also noted that the LGA was undertaking a review of its relationships with the regional local government structures.

(h) The LGA Member Allowances System

4.33 The Panel noted that the LGA was to undertake an independent review of its member allowances system. Particular points raised by interviewees in relation to the present system were:

- Where either office holders and ordinary board members were to be given more responsibilities, particularly through the operation of any lead member system, then these responsibilities should be reflected in agreed job descriptions and the allowances differentials between Chair; office holders and board members.
- Substitutes do not presently receive any allowance, but there is a case for saying that they should, where they actually attend a board meeting in place of a full board member. Groups may also want to consider whether attendance at pre –board group meetings or the board (as an observer) might attract some form of allowance from group funds.

(i) Member induction

4.34 At present, new members on boards receive a brief pack of information from the members' services officers on the operation of the boards. This includes meeting dates; contact names; copies of the constitution and protocols etc; the LGA allowances scheme, together with copies of LGA documents such as the summer and winter reviews and LGA manifesto. More detailed briefing on the policies and priorities of particular boards are left to the discretion of the Programme Directors concerned.

4.35 There was a view expressed particularly by ordinary members of boards that much more needed to be done to introduce new members to the work of the boards to which they had been appointed., so as to get them up to speed and able to contribute to the work of the board as quickly as possible.

5. Review of Member Task Groups

5.1 The working group at the outset of its work looked at the process for establishing the Task Groups, through interviews with LGA senior staff and the heads of the political group offices. It then sent a questionnaire to the members of 3 Task groups, which had completed their work, to assess the views of those members on the operation of the task groups. A discussion session was then held with the lead members of the three task groups and the LGA policy officers involved. A second questionnaire was subsequently sent to members of a further four task groups, which had since finished their work.

5.2 In general, returns from members of the first three groups suggested that participation in the work of these groups had been seen by their members as a worthwhile experience, both in terms of the member interaction and the end product. This view was largely endorsed by members of one of the additional task groups questioned. However, returns from the other three task groups in the second tranche were too low to be of use. Significantly, a large majority of those responding indicated that they would, if asked, be willing to participate in another working group.

Experience of the operation of the task groups

5.3 In discussions, task group members indicated that too much time had been taken in bringing some group members up to speed on the focus and objectives of the task group. Some task group members were concerned that, unless there was an appropriate mix of members in terms of relevant experience, time taken in "getting up to speed", could especially handicap a task and finish group. This in turn suggested the need for more accurate information within the political groups as to the skills/experience profile of members who might be appointed to task groups.

5.4 At their inception, there was an expectation that task groups might wish to explore the use of IT to avoid the need to have traditional meetings – through e-mail groupings; tele and video conferencing etc. Responses suggested that whilst the use of technology had its place, members still valued the chemistry created by actual meetings.

Establishing Task groups

5.5 Looking at the process of establishing task groups, the working group had found that, at their inception, there had been considerable delays in establishing task groups and getting them underway. These delays appeared to have been overcome in 2004/5, and an agreed process was in place. However, evidence from the work of the Boards group suggested that significant delays had now appeared in setting up the “second wave” of task groups during 2005. As a result, there are at present fewer task groups in existence than had originally been envisaged.

5.6 The process appears overly bureaucratic, with boards first having to propose the establishment of a task group to the LGA Executive; the agreement of the Executive both in principle and to a remit for the group obtained; and then appointments made by the groups. The involvement of the LGA Executive might have been seen at the outset as a control mechanism over any over – enthusiasm on the part of boards in establishing such groups. The following section would suggest that such fears have not materialised, and there may be merit in the Executive considering whether it still needs involvement in the appointment process.

Task Groups as a means of member engagement

5.7 The previous system of executives consisted of 19 executives, each with 14 members, totalling 266 members. This structure had itself replaced a system of large committees (sometimes up to 100 members) formed at the establishment of the LGA in 1997.

5.8 Under the new arrangements, in addition to the new boards, comprising 90 members, it was envisaged, at the outset, that there would be around 40 task groups. However, the LGA Executive at an early stage took the view that this number was too high and in 2004/5 there were a maximum of 27 groups in operation. The task and finish nature of the task groups mean that their existence does not easily relate to calendar years. However, by December 2005, 17 groups had ended their work at some point during the year; 10 groups still operating; 1 new group had been formed and 4 groups were being scoped.

5.9 The maximum numbers of members who could have been involved in task groups during 2005 would have been 189 (27 groups x 7 members). However, in practice, due to vacancies, and members serving on more than one task group, the numbers serving during 2005 was 162.

These members came from the following types of authority:

County Councils:	36	
Districts:	57	
Unitaries/ Mets:	47	
London Boroughs:	20	
Others (Jt Auths)	2	(total 162)

And from the following regions:

South East:	43	
London:	20	
South West:	17	
East Anglia:	11	
West Midlands:	12	
East Midlands:	12	
Yorkshire/ Humbs;	12	
North West:	19	
North East:	12	
Wales:	4	(total 162)

5.10 The Panel also sought information on the seniority of these members within their local authority. Of the 162 members, 73 (or 45% of members) held one of the following senior posts within their authority:

Leaders of Councils: 24 (15% of task group members)

Deputy Leaders: 11

Group leaders (opposition): 19

Deputy Group leaders: 1

Cabinet members: 18

5.11 Paragraph 5.8 suggests that fewer task groups are being set up in the current year. From the comments received from board members, it is not clear why there had been this decline in numbers of task groups. On the one hand, board members have pointed to the delays involved in setting up task groups as causing them to find other mechanisms for undertaking the intended piece of work – usually by setting up smaller groups of members from within the board concerned. Justification for such an approach has been that where the policy issue was time – critical (particularly where related to the passage of legislation), the timetable did not allow for any lag in setting up a task group.

Board / Task Group Relations

5.12 However, in relation to the numbers of task groups being set up, other comments received pointed to the possibility of tensions between boards and task groups, in the context of a more focussed agenda, with boards possibly being unwilling to delegate “plum” pieces of work to task groups. Some ordinary board members perceived a gap between the board and any member task groups undertaking work within the board’s area. Comments such as “I feel adrift from them – they are floating in the ether” were made. However, others reported that links were good, but that the presence of a board member on a task group was seen as a crucial determinant of good communications between them.

5.13 In discussions with task group members, good links between boards and task groups were seen as vital. They agreed that a board member sitting on the task group was necessary, or there would be a danger that a vacuum could develop.

5.14 Other comments received from board members indicate a growing view that, with experience of their operation, task groups may be better suited to certain tasks, rather than others– for example, policy formulation in new areas; or the provision of guidance to a specific time schedule. They appear less effective where their objectives are extremely time sensitive; or where objectives are too open – ended. This view has not been tested with task group members, but it may be worthy of further exploration by the LGA.

Wider issues raised by task group members

5.15 Some evidence received suggested that there is a perceived need for other forms of groupings, both member and officer, to provide some form of wider discussion forum, or sounding board, to advise boards and to participate in policy formulation. There was a concern that there may be a loss of more specific service expertise amongst members which the present task group arrangements were not adequately picking up, and that the creation of such semi – permanent groupings of members linked to boards could retain such expertise.

5.16 It was also suggested that there needed to be some form of development or succession policy for board membership, which task group membership or the suggested wider groupings could provide for the political groups.

6. Conclusions

6.1 The Panel was asked by LGA Executive to examine the experience of members in operating the new board structure; and had separately been looking at how member task groups had been working. The Panel's examination of the two principal elements of the new member arrangements has also led it to consider the reaction of members in the system to the underlying strategy from which the formal member structure has arisen, and the implications of that strategy for the wider membership.

6.2 The original consultation document recognised that the LGA was both a national lobbying organisation and a representative body for its member authorities, and that “any member structure for the LGA needs to provide for both of these elements”.

6.3 The strategy of “Doing less, but better”, and putting members at the forefront of relations with government has been a bold one. It has placed a much greater emphasis than in the past on the LGA as a lobbying organisation. To be more successful at lobbying, the LGA has decided to pick its targets; and the more focussed approach being undertaken by boards is a direct result of this change of emphasis.

6.4 The evidence which the Panel has heard clearly shows that the LGA is enjoying an increased impact in its lobbying role, primarily through its senior members on the LGA Executive and boards. However, in altering the traditional balance between its roles as a lobbying and as a representative organisation, it has, perhaps inevitably, increased the tension between the two roles.

6.5 These roles are not mutually exclusive, and indeed can reinforce one another. But if the relative balance is changed between the roles, the Association must ensure that its constituents are broadly supportive of the arrangements in place to undertake both roles. Its constituents need to be content that the LGA is as effective as possible as a lobbyist on their behalf. Evidence suggests that this effectiveness has been much improved by the new structure. But, as a representative organisation, it will continue to be under pressure from its constituents to be “all things to all”. A more focussed approach by boards carries the danger that the wider constituency feels less engaged with the work of the organisation, and sees it as failing in its representative role, whilst discounting gains from its lobbying activities.

6.6 Evidence heard by the Panel from some members expressing concerns about the more focussed approach being undertaken by boards can be seen as reflecting the tension between the two roles.

6.7 The proposals for the new structure recognised the need to satisfy both roles. The boards, smaller and with a more focussed agenda, would spearhead the lobbying initiative. The task of continuing to engage the wider membership, fell partly to existing structures – the Urban and Rural Commissions, the Fire Forum and a new Tourism Forum, and a range of Special Interest Groups. However, the main new element for member involvement was the member task groups. An extension of the numbers of policy review groups, a feature of the original proposals, was not pursued.

6.8 The *central findings* of the Panel’s work have been that

- The new structure of Boards has been in the main successful in achieving the principal objective of the re-organisation – becoming more effective in influencing central government. A range of successes have been reported to the Panel, but particularly in relation to finance and the improvement agenda.
- However, there are clear signs that the obverse of the gains in lobbying effectiveness has been a worrying worsening of the general engagement with the wider membership.
- The arrangements put in place to ensure the continued involvement of the wider membership have not worked well. Member Task Groups, whilst having some individual successes, have not in general been able to take up the engagement task. Further consideration needs to be given to ways of keeping the wider membership both supportive of the strategic approach and engaged in policy discussion and development.

6.9 So whilst there does not appear a case for any fundamental revision to the basic member structure, attention does need to be given to those elements of the structure which appear to be working less well, and which need to deliver an effective engagement with the wider membership.

6.10 Set out below are a number of recommendations related to aspects of the member structure.

The recommendations of the Scrutiny Panel

1. The board structure

6.11 The new board structure has delivered a number of significant benefits over the previous member arrangements:

- A more focussed approach to policy priorities
- More informed debate on these priorities
- A higher profile for senior LGA members as champions for these policy priorities and for local government as a whole
- And, as a result, a greater impact for the LGA in getting its message across, particularly to Government
- A more cohesive decision making structure in the LGA Executive, now including board chairs

6.12 However, whilst significant improvements in lobbying were seen, there remained some concern that the LGA may be placing too much emphasis on lobbying the government, and that there appeared some defensiveness in lobbying opposition MPs.

6.13 Whilst there was general support for the board model, there are some members both within the formal structure – and by implication in the wider membership – who either do not appreciate or do not accept the consequences of this approach. The Panel has found, from its interviews, that the Board model still does not command the wholehearted support of all those serving on it. Of those members interviewed by the Panel:

- Chairs and office holders are very committed
- Most Board members tend to see the benefits, but see it as a system still evolving
- Some Board members remain opposed

6.14 Even amongst those who were most committed to the board model, there was a recognition of the particular difficulties presented to both the Environment and Regeneration Boards by their wide remits, and a general agreement that there would be merit in considering them again.

6.15 Chairs of boards and some office holders are facing an increased time commitment, whilst ordinary board members may feel less engaged. The approach tried by some boards of allocating specific policy areas to office holders or other board members through a “lead member” system only appears to have had a limited success. Lack of clear lines of responsibility from the board to lead member; and lack of support both administratively and through the allowance system were cited as presenting difficulties. However, there was support for this approach to be re-visited.

6.16 The Panel noted that the LGA was undertaking a review of its member allowances scheme which ought to permit a consideration of the relative responsibilities of chairs, other office holders and other board members and their appropriate reflection in the allowance scheme.

6.17 There was a consensus amongst board members interviewed that the LGA Executive needed to monitor the business plan as a whole following the development of specific priorities by Boards. However, the Panel found no evidence that the LGA Executive was monitoring or directing the business plan through the year, once boards’ priorities had been agreed. The Panel was concerned that the LGA Executive needed to be satisfied that it had adequate oversight of the business plan priorities set by the boards. In particular, the Executive needed to know that the priorities as set out in the plan were being delivered.

6.18 Some chairs of boards and office holders indicated that they would welcome more support for their activities and the opportunity for developing skills in their roles on behalf of the Association.

6.19 The member induction arrangements are at present rudimentary, and evidence suggests that more thought needs to be given to enabling new members to get quickly up to speed in their board roles.

Recommendations

1. More needs to be done by the Association to convince both board members and the wider membership of authorities of the benefits of “Doing less, but better”.
2. The LGA Executive should ask itself whether it had adequate arrangements in place for oversight of the LGA business plan.
3. The remits of the Environment and Regeneration Boards should be revisited to consider whether they may be too wide, and if so, whether an additional board may be required.
4. The lead member approach to Boards’ remits should be revisited as a means of better engaging the ordinary board member and taking pressure off office holders.

5. Consideration should be given to additional support and development for chairs and office holders, if requested.
6. Board and task group member induction needs to be improved.
7. The LGA allowances system should reflect any increased responsibilities undertaken by board members.
8. The allowances review should also consider the provision of allowances for substitute members when they are attending a board in the place of a board member; and groups should be asked to consider providing support for substitutes attending board meetings at their invitation as observers.
9. Consideration should be given to the potential benefits of lobbying opposition MPs and peers.

2. Member Task Groups

6.20 The original expectation of member task groups was that they would enable leading members in authorities to become involved in the work of the LGA, without the same time commitment that membership of the formal member structure requires. They were also seen as a means of involving the wider membership in policy formulation.

6.21 Difficulties in establishing task groups, including often unacceptable delays in their establishment, and a reduction in their numbers has meant that, in the Panel's view, they have not fulfilled the original expectation of involving a wider membership. The involvement of the LGA Executive in the approval mechanism may have contributed to the bureaucratic nature of the process, and it should consider whether it needs to continue to be involved.

6.22 But, aside from the problems caused by delays, it was perhaps over – optimistic to expect that they could, of themselves, be the only means of attracting a wider engagement of members under the new structure.

6.23 However, Task Groups have done much good work and have attracted a number of members from outside the formal structure. In the Panel's view, they can continue to fulfil a valuable role for the LGA, but that consideration should be given to whether they are best suited to particular tasks, such as policy formulation in new areas, rather than reacting to other time – critical agendas, or acting as substitutes for the former executives.

Recommendations

10. That boards should still make use of member task groups to undertake time – limited tasks on their behalf.

11. That consideration should be given to the sorts of tasks best suited to such time – limited investigations.
12. That an urgent review of the process for the establishment of task groups be undertaken to ensure that they are established in a shorter time span, including whether the LGA Executive really needs to continue to approve formally the establishment of task groups.

3. Engaging the wider membership

6.24 The Panel's central finding is that the lobbying success, delivered by the new arrangements, has not been matched by continued engagement of the wider membership, through the mechanism of the member task groups. There is, therefore, now an urgent need for the LGA to explore whether this process on engagement through task groups should be augmented by the establishment of other wider groupings to undertake policy development for Boards.

6.25 Both Board and task group members saw a need for some form of wider discussion forum, distinct from the task and finish nature of task groups, to advise and assist boards and to participate in policy formulation for specific policy areas. Such an approach could provide a mechanism for wider member involvement; and provide a two way channel of communication. It could also address the opposition to the Board model articulated by some board members through a continued concern at what is perceived as a lack of priority given to certain local government policy areas.

6.26 The Panel has particularly noted the original intention in the package of proposals that policy review groups should be a feature of the structure linked to boards, but that this was not proceeded with widely. However, the Panel would wish to remind the Association of the recommendation of the General Assembly that boards should consider ways in which service interests might meet together.

6.27 In addition to the need for structures to facilitate policy discussion and development below boards, concern has been expressed at the general lack of a professional advisory structure to advise members, but also to fill the gap left by the more focussed approach in handling the wider policy issues traditionally undertaken in – house by the Association. The Panel has noted that the LGA is currently, with its partner central bodies, undertaking a series of change initiatives designed to facilitate much closer working. Internally, the LGA is undergoing quite radical staff re-organisations, to bring the staffing profile into line with the “Doing less, but better” approach. This will involve a reduction in the numbers of in-house policy staff to release funds for buying in external expertise in support of its policy priorities. As a consequence, the LGA has recognised the need to develop external advisory networks to undertake some more traditional advisory work on behalf of the LGA. Such advisory networks had been extensively available to the predecessor local authority associations, and in addition to providing a means of handling a wider range of policy issues for the Association, could be available to provide a source of professional advice to LGA Boards, if required.

6.28 These two initiatives suggest a potential way forward to fill the gap between the present, more focussed approach, and the traditional expectations of the LGA's wider member constituency for policy advice on non – priority service areas.

Recommendations

13. The benefits of groupings below the boards to cater for the policy development of specific service interests should be explored.

14. Much more needs to be done to devise, and publicise, alternative, and convincing ways of handling traditional policy areas outside the board model, whether through more policy review groups; the central bodies; professional officer advisory networks or other means. Advice from the professional officer advisory networks could also be available to Boards, as required.

Scrutiny Panel: Review of LGA Member Structures

Membership of Working Groups

1. Review of operation of LGA boards

Cllr Malcolm Blanksby (Wycombe DC) (Chair)
Cllr David Harmer (Surrey CC)
Cllr Trevor Jones OBE (Dorset CC)
Cllr Robin Stonebridge (Rotherham MBC)

2. Review of member task groups

Cllr Trevor Jones OBE (Dorset CC) (Chair)
Cllr Mrs Muriel Barker CBE (N E Lincolnshire C)
Cllr John Gyford (Braintree DC)
Cllr Mrs Julia Peel (Maldon DC)