

## **Is the new performance framework working? Summary of survey findings**

In autumn 2008 the Local Government Association conducted a survey of Chief Executives in all councils in England. The survey covers Chief Executives' views of the progress of the new performance framework. This includes the recent Local Area Agreement negotiations, the extent of co-operation of different partner agencies, new arrangements for improvement and the forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment.

The full survey report is available on request: contact details at the end.

### **General perceptions of the New Performance Framework**

Chief executives were asked to assess how much progress has been made so far towards an appropriate balance between central and local government, on six themes.

**Strengthening local democracy, through greater scope for local priorities: 48% thought great or moderate progress had been made, with 52% saying there had been little or no progress.**

**Developing the council's democratic role in place-shaping, through a clearer leadership role in local strategic partnerships, and the new duty to co-operate on various public agencies: 67% thought great or moderate progress had been made, with 34% saying there had been little or no progress.**

**Strengthening the local definition of priorities, through reduction of national performance requirements and the new arrangements for agreeing priorities and targets through Local Area Agreements: 61% thought great or moderate progress had been made, with 40% saying there had been little or no progress.**

**Greater emphasis on assessing and managing performance locally, through reducing national assessment and inspection, and the move to the Comprehensive Area Assessment: 42% thought great or moderate progress had been made, with 57% saying little or no progress had been made.**

**A new approach to improvement, led by the local government sector itself and supported by the development of Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships: 56% thought great or moderate progress had been made, with 44% believing there was little or no progress.**

**Greater financial autonomy, through increased local government control over income raising and expenditure: 10% thought great or moderate progress had been made, with 89% saying there was little or no progress.**

**Overall, district council chief executives were likely to say there had been slightly less progress than upper tier authorities across all of the six elements described above.**

## **Views of the Local Area Agreement negotiation process**

Councils were generally satisfied with the overall role of partner organisations, with 78% very satisfied or satisfied. On the role of the Government Offices in the LAA negotiation process, 64% were very satisfied or satisfied, whilst on the role of central government in the negotiations, 23% were very satisfied or satisfied, with 32% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Asked their view of the National Indicator Set as a basis for identifying the most relevant central/local priorities, views were not very positive, with no-one rating it as very good, 24% rating it as good, whilst 31% rated it as poor or very poor. Asked to what extent the indicators provided good measures of the issue they cover, no-one thought that all the indicators were good, and 18% said that most of the indicators were good measures of the issues they covered, whilst 51% thought that around half were good measures, and 27% said that fewer than half of them were good measures.

Asked to what extent their LAA accurately reflected their area's priorities, 27% thought it did so to a great extent, and 57% to a moderate extent; 15% thought it did so to a small extent. Nine per cent of councils thought their area's LAA included, to a great extent, priorities that their area did not want locally, but which were priorities for central government; 42% thought this occurred to a moderate extent. Two thirds of councils thought that all or most LAA targets were set at an achievable level.

Overall, nearly two thirds were satisfied with their LAA as a whole; 9% of councils were very satisfied and 51% satisfied; 13% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. District council chief executives were less likely to be satisfied with their area's LAA as a whole: 83% of county or unitary authorities (the 'responsible authorities' in the legislation) were very satisfied or satisfied; for district councils this figure was 44%.

## **Organisations with a duty to co-operate with the LAA process**

On the basis of experience locally so far, and thinking about issues such as engagement, flexibility and willingness to sign up to appropriate targets, chief executives were asked to evaluate the level of co-operation gained from each of the organisations with a legal duty to co-operate with LAAs.

Some of the main partners were assessed very highly: 95% rated Primary Care Trusts as very good or good, 92% rated police as very good or good, other organisations were assessed as very good or good as follows: 82% fire authorities, 60% Jobcentre Plus, 52% local probation boards. Other scores were lower, but generally this was because there were high figures for 'not applicable' or 'don't know'. The Highways Agency was assessed as good or very good by 5% and as poor or very poor by 14%; probation boards were assessed as poor or very poor by 12%, other ratings as poor were below 10%.

These questions about organisations subject to the duty to co-operate with LAAs were not asked of district councils.

## **Support for Improvement**

Generally chief executives appeared well informed and well engaged with Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships, particularly as these are new bodies in their amalgamated form. We found that 86% described themselves as very or fairly well informed about RIEPs, and 79% described their authority as very or fairly well engaged in their RIEP. Half said that the RIEP had helped their council to access tailored support.

Council chief executives were very strongly in support of the principle of council-led support. Ninety nine percent agreed that local government-led support is important to help councils share best practice and innovation, and 97% agreed that local government-led support is important to help councils in difficulty. There was also strong support, 87%, for the principle that the sector (LGA, IDeA, REIPs) should be notified before central government issues an Improvement Notice, to enable sector-led action to tackle the problem.

### **Comprehensive Area Assessment**

The survey asked chief executives a range of questions about the forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment. Asked whether the recently published proposals for CAA met the White Paper ambition; only 7% said they did so to a great extent, 62% that they did so to a moderate extent, 22% said they did so to a small extent, and 4% not at all.

Asked whether they agreed or disagreed that CAA would achieve the right balance between assessing outcomes and assessing organisations: 28% agreed it would, whereas 33% disagreed. On whether CAA would put citizens at the heart of assessing outcomes: only 21% agreed it would whereas 41% disagreed. On whether CAA would take sufficient account of role of councillors in shaping priorities, 11% agreed it would; 60% disagreed. On whether CAA would reduce the burden of inspection on councils, 16% agree it would, but more than half (55%) disagree.

Around a third (32%) agree CAA will be a more effective tool for reporting to local people, but 32% disagree. Whilst 45% think it will be a helpful tool in improving outcomes for the area, 17% disagree. Asked whether involvement of member and officer peers would add credibility to inspectorate judgements, 78% agree it would, but 4% disagree. LSP partners were considered generally well informed about CAA by 43% of chief executives, whilst 36% disagreed that they were.

### **Note on methodology**

The survey was circulated electronically to all council chief executives in England, on 18 September 2008, and responses were received between then and 20 October 2008. The questionnaire sent to district council chief executives was slightly shorter, omitting the assessment of the degree of co-operation in negotiations of each named partner organisations.

Full responses were received from 158 authorities representing a 41% response rate. A higher response rate (59%) was received from counties than other types of authority; this may be due to their complex role in the LAA process compared to other authorities. The lowest response rate by type of authority was for London boroughs (30%). By region, the highest response rate was from the East Midlands (58%), the lowest response rate was from the West Midlands (29%).

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