

20 January 2009

Sector Led Engagement Event 8th & 9th December 2008

Summary

On the 8th and 9th December leading councillors, chief executives and officers from across the country came together to discuss how we could provide sector led support for councils facing difficulties. Feedback from the event will form the basis of a consultation document on a sector led framework for supporting councils in difficulty.

Recommendations

- That a consultation paper is developed for discussion amongst the sector, Inspectorates and the government on building the future framework.
- That the sector led framework be discussed at the Board's awayday in February 2009.

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Background

1. The IDeA and LGA Group work closely with councils to support improvement and, in particular, have a history of working with councils in which there is poor performance. This report describes work to take forward the sector's ambition to develop a framework for sector-led support for councils facing difficult. It is a central part of improvement work to prevent failure and external intervention in councils.
2. The event on 8th & 9th December 2008 provided an opportunity for members and officers to come together to share ideas and new ways to approach this sensitive area of work. Although the focus for the event was work with councils facing difficulties, some of the thinking is relevant to the broader question of the nature, strengths and challenges of sector-led support with all authorities and partnerships.
3. There were a number of areas where there was a high level of consensus amongst participants. Authorities have strengths that others can learn from and problem areas where they need support. Support and challenge from within the sector is likely to be far more cost effective than government intervention and *therefore* local government and its support agencies assert their right to address agreed areas of weakness before any government intervention is taken.
4. For sector-led support to be effective, the council or partnership needs to acknowledge the need to improve and accept help. There may be times when local government as a whole will act as an advocate for a council if the council is asserting its right to set locally appropriate priorities. Political ownership of the need to respond effectively to areas of significant underperformance is critical at national, regional and local levels.
5. The following strengths and areas for further development emerged through the discussions:

Strengths	Areas for Development
RIEPs have broadened and deepened ownership of the shared improvement agenda.	Our ability to deploy capacity to make significant improvements needs to be developed further.
There is a high level of confidence in IDeA's track record in working with and co-designing bespoke, peer based improvement programmes for council's facing difficulties.	Insufficiently developed range of approaches where there isn't local ownership of the improvement issue.
Accredited political and officer peers are crucial in delivering improvement.	We need to develop further approaches to working on partnership issues.
	There is insufficient shared understanding of the contribution of the LGA to the

	improvement agenda
	Although far simpler than the Governmental/regulatory architecture, there is still confusion about the roles and contribution of different sector-led bodies.

Reflections on the key challenges in the development of the framework

6. Four areas considered critical to successful sector-led challenge and support were considered in more depth:

- **Trust – Councils need to be honest and self aware about their problems.** Any sector led initiative needs to ensure that there is trust between the individual council and the sectors improvement architecture. Trust between local and central government needs to develop further.
- **Political ownership – at a national, regional and local level** – widespread recognition of the role of political parties and political processes to tackle key issues is a crucial element.
- **The need for clarity regarding the support architecture** - It is important that there is clarity regarding the support architecture so that councils know where to go and the level of support available to help them in challenging situations.
- **Early warning signs of difficulty** - An agreed approach to identifying the early warning signs of difficulty. This takes the form of national and local performance information and other intelligence. An agreed framework could build on good practice established within some Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships and also recognise local context too.

Next steps - Outline timetable

7. A draft framework for engagement with councils showing signs of difficulty is being developed, following the event. The intention is that it will be circulated to members of the Improvement Board, the sector, Inspectorates and the government for consultation in March with a view to finalising a framework for support to be available in April 2009.

Financial Implications

8. This work would be carried out within existing budgets and resources of the LGA and IDeA.

Implications for Wales

9. There are no implications for Wales arising directly from this report although the experience of performance failure and improvement needs to be shared.

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