Nowhere left behind

Developing a Framework for Sector-led Help – Draft Consultation paper

Foreword

1.   Although local government has shown continuous improvement over recent years we are not complacent. First and foremost, local government's ambition is to be the best it can be and self improvement is the most effective way of further raising the already high level of performance and consistency;

Local government itself can and should take responsibility for improving its own performance. It makes sense therefore that councils facing difficulty or requiring additional support should turn to the local government to provide that support. The expertise and experience within local government should be developed and deployed as much as possible in the move from 'good' to 'great' During these difficult financial times this is the most sensible and cost effective approach to self improvement within local government.

The proposals in this paper build on our already extensive experience of helping councils facing difficulties to drive their own improvement. Clearer roles are suggested for the key parts of the local government improvement architecture, councils themselves, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships, the IDeA and LGA.

While we are not complacent we have a track record of which we can be proud and which gives credibility to our assertion that the government should continue the journey on which it has embarked, and appropriately reduce the role of 'field forces,' inspection and intervention.

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Executive Summary

2.   Local government can demonstrate an enviable track record of improvement over recent years. The strength of the self improvement approach was recognized when the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy was published by CLG and the LGA in December 2007. There is however, no room for complacency. Local Government needs to introduce a clearer framework that describes how it will work with council's facing particular difficulties to support and facilitate their improvement. We are asking at the same time that central Government and the regulatory regime to steps back in order to give local government the opportunity to demonstrate it can be responsible for its own improvement.

3.   For the framework to be effective four factors were judged to be critical:

- Identifying early warning signs of difficulty
- Building trust and confidence
- Recognising the importance of, and sustaining political ownership
- A clearer framework of support architecture.

Key concepts and principles

        Given these underpinning assumptions the framework needs to be informed by the following key concepts and principles:

- **Nowhere left behind** – We believe that local government as a whole can not allow failure – both because of the impact on communities and on the reputation of local government as a whole (with the public and other key partners/stakeholders).

- **Family first** – Local government should be given first shot at sorting out our own problems before governmental/regulatory intervention. The rationale for this being that a local government led approach is more likely to be effective, sustainable and likely to be less expensive.

- **Critical friends** – For local government help to work, local government support bodies, working with councillor and officer peers, need to both build trust and confidence with authorities and also provide real challenge.

- **Working together for the sake of our shared reputation -** Local government as a whole together with individual councils needs to take responsibility for each

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other's successes and problems. This means top performers may need to loan out capacity to those in need. This concept also requires collaboration between sector support bodies and not competition.

- **Doing the hard, 'soft' stuff** - We want to keep the emphasis of this framework on what works – the use of our most experienced and skilled political and officer peers, the use of judgement by those peers as individuals and working as part of a team, the development of trust in relationships that allow challenge and help to be given and received. This means the approach will not be overly bureaucratic, involve extensive tick lists or detailed procedures (the easy, but we would argue, relatively ineffective 'hard' stuff).

- **Ownership is key** - The primary responsibility for any council's improvement lies with that council. Local government can offer support, advice, expertise and challenge but the council needs to drive its own improvement journey. Improvement support offered will therefore generally need to be bespoke and co-designed with the council.

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Definition of terms

4.   This consultation paper has been produced to describe how local government (individual authorities and the local government owned improvement support architecture) will work together to overcome the particular difficulties that **any council may at some time face**.

5.   The following scenarios may help to illustrate what is meant by "particular difficulties":

- **Council 1** has a strong track record on improvement and community leadership but has recently become aware of weaknesses in aspects of children's services that could result in, most importantly, unsafe practice, and also damage to the reputation of the authority.
- **Council 2** has services that are generally performing well but has developed poor relationships between officers and members and between different political groups. These are resulting in poor media coverage and are affecting the quality of decision making.

6.   The focus of this consultation paper is currently on councils. There are however several places where the paper touches on dysfunctional partnerships. There is a wider debate to be had about the extent to which councils are taking responsibility for poor performance/behaviour across LSPs and this issue probably needs to be examined in more depth as part of the follow-up to this paper.

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Summary of Consultation Questions

Consultation question 1
To what extent should local government-led help framework seek to address issues across local partnerships as well as within councils?

Consultation question 2
Where are the key strengths and areas for development of the current government and sector-led approaches?

Consultation question 3
Do you agree with the underpinning assumptions and key concepts?

Consultation question 4
Are they sufficiently in evidence in the proposals part of this consultation paper?

Consultation Question 5
How could the respective roles and responsibilities be improved?

Consultation Question 6
The clearing house role was suggested by one of the participants following the December event. If needed is this role best undertaken by the IDeA and/or by the RIEP or by the two working together?

Consultation question 7
Are there other actions or commitments that local government should be asking for?

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Background - The story so far….

A strong record of improvement

7.   Local Government's record of achievement is strong. In December 2002 the first CPA results were published and the number of Good or Excellent single tier or county councils was 76. By February 2008 when the 2007 scores were announced the number of 3 or 4 star councils had increased to 123 and as at December 2008 stands at 125. At the same time the number of 0 or 1 star councils has reduced from 34 to just 2. *Figures need updating with final CPA results.*

But we need to do more

8.   The case for sector led improvement has been made, accepted and is reflected in the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy. However despite the track record of improvement success and a clear policy direction many of the behaviours, both in central and local government, reflect the old top down ways of working. . In January 2008, Clive Grace and Professor Steve Martin published 'Getting better all the time", an independent assessment of local government improvement and its future prospects'. Their essay commissioned by the IDeA for the sector, set out some fundamental challenges to the system in terms of the next stage of improvement in local government. Three key challenges were identified:

a) **Government and regulators** are still implicitly working with an old model of improvement, largely based on top down approaches, which is not fit for the new world that local authorities and their partners find themselves in;

b) both **central and local government** are struggling to turn the rhetoric of reform into the realities of implementation

- central government to let go, and
- local government to take responsibility and move beyond compliance; and

c) the **improvement challenges ahead** will not require merely incremental improvement but embedded innovation.

9.   The **National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy** agreed by the LGA and central government, published December 2007 (check) established a new devolved "system" for sector led improvement. With local government at the heart of driving continued performance in local public services new roles were given to RIEPS, the IDeA, the LGA and indeed government. While the system is developing

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rapidly, and can already point to success, the challenge of a coherent and agreed response from all partners remains**.** In the absence of a defined response, old behaviours can't be challenged and will persist, central government won't let go and councils will fail to move beyond compliance.

10.   Leaving no place behind is challenge to all parts of the system.   Councils need to engage, be open to challenge and scrutiny and accept the responsibility that their performance reflects on the sector as a whole; RIEPS need to provide help to councils facing difficulties; the IDeA needs to use its peer expertise to support this engagement and provide some of the underpinning infrastructure; and the LGA needs to provide overall political leadership (building on its ground breaking commitment to "no poors and weaks"). The Government and regulators, will, of course, ultimately step in when services fail, but they have to accept that the need for them to step in can only be reduced if, at a system level, they step back.

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The foundation upon which the proposals are built

Local government led help event

11.   This consultation paper develops the initial thinking from an event held in early December 2008, when leading councillors including political peers and chief executives from across the country came together to discuss how to develop a framework for sector-led support for councils facing particular difficulties (attendee list included as an appendix 1.*)*

12.   The group's thinking was informed by its experience of working in and with councils facing unusually severe problems over many years. The roles of those contributing included:

- Chief executives, and leading councillors who had worked to turn their councils around, with assistance from local government's support agencies, peers, and the regulators;
- Political and officer peers;
- Members of RIEP governance structures and sub regional partnerships;
- Leading members of the LGA including it's Executive, the Improvement Board, Performance Support Panel and Political Improvement Boards
- IDeA, RIEP and LGA officers.

13.   The event provided an opportunity to air issues, share perspectives and approaches and deepen our collective understanding of what is difficult and sensitive area of improvement work. Although the focus for the event was work with councils facing particular 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. The thinking from the event has informed this consultation framework. In addition those present identified four critical success factors:

- Identifying early warning signs of difficulty
- Building trust and confidence
- Recognising the importance of, and sustaining political ownership
- A clearer framework of support architecture.

14.   Thinking about these critical success factors is summarized in appendix 3.

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Evaluation of current approaches

15.   Set out below is a brief evaluation of the strengths and areas for development in the current approaches taken by both government and regulators, and by local government. These inform the principles and proposals later in the paper.

Key strengths and areas for development of the government approach

Strengths
CPA, as well as representing a huge opportunity cost, has increased councils' focus on areas of core competence and brought about improvement as a result.
The inspection and audit regime is valued where it is focused on the protection of vulnerable service users, and on probity and on public accountability and value for money.
Areas for Development
Inspection and audit should be focused on assessment activity rather than improvement activity.
There is a lack of clarity on the respective roles of Government Offices and the Audit Commission in monitoring performance.
The number and cost of government commissioned improvement bodies and field forces is excessive and needs to be radically reduced.
Some examples of intervention seem geared to ministers being seen to act in the face of bad publicity – rather than by what is most likely to be effective.

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Key strengths and areas for development of the current sector-led approach

Strengths
RIEPs have broadened and deepened ownership of the shared improvement and efficiency agenda.
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.
Accredited political and officer peers are crucial in facilitating improvement.
Areas for Development
Our ability to deploy capacity to deliver solutions/provide support needs to be developed further.
Insufficiently developed range of approaches where there isn't local ownership of the improvement issue.
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.

Consultation question 2 *Where are the key strengths and areas for development of the current government and sector-led approaches*

Insert Summarized Case studies of local government led help.

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Underpinning assumptions

16.   There are a number of areas where there appears to be a high level of consensus across local government:

a) All authorities have strengths that others can learn from and problem areas where they need support;
b) Leading councillors and officers need to accept and understand that they have a responsibility to contribute to improvement and address underperformance in other local authorities as well as their own to protect the reputation of local government
c) Support and challenge from within local government is likely to be far more effective and also considerably less expensive than government intervention and *therefore*:
d) Local government and its support agencies assert their right to be given early notice of potential problems identified through the inspections process/regulatory regime and to address agreed areas of weakness before any government intervention is taken;
e) For sector-led support to be effective the council concerned has to be prepared to acknowledge the need to improve and accept help;
f) 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, for example, set locally appropriate priorities.
g) The government has the right to intervene if a sector led approach has not worked in a particular council.

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Key concepts and principles

17.   Given these underpinning assumptions the framework needs to be informed by the following key concepts and principles:

- **Nowhere left behind** – We believe that local government as a whole can not allow failure – both because of the impact on communities and on the reputation of local government as a whole (with the public and other key partners/stakeholders).

- **Family first** – Local government should be given first shot at sorting out our own problems before governmental/regulatory intervention. The rationale for this being that a local government led approach is more likely to be effective, sustainable and likely to be less expensive.

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- **Working together for the sake of our shared reputation -** Local government as a whole together with individual councils needs to take responsibility for each other's successes and problems. This means top performers may need to loan out capacity to those in need. This concept also requires collaboration between sector support bodies and not competition.

- **Doing the hard, 'soft' stuff** - We want to keep the emphasis of this framework on what works – the use of our most experienced and skilled political and officer peers, the use of judgement by those peers as individuals and working as part of a team, the development of trust in relationships that allow challenge and help to be given and received. This means the approach will not be overly bureaucratic, involve extensive tick lists or detailed procedures (the easy, but we would argue, relatively ineffective 'hard' stuff).

- **Ownership is key** - The primary responsibility for any council's improvement lies with that council. Local government can offer support, advice, expertise and challenge but the council needs to drive its own improvement journey. Improvement support offered will therefore generally need to be bespoke and co-designed with the council.

Consultation questions 3 and 4
Do you agree with the underpinning assumptions and key concepts?
Are they sufficiently in evidence in the proposals part of this consultation paper?

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Proposals

18.   The proposed framework is broken into 5 parts:

- The role of individual councils
- The role of RIEPs
- The role of the LGA
- The role IDeA and the other central bodies
- Government and regulatory regime – the ask

19.   To help build an understanding of how the approach works and will work in future a number of scenarios are then described.

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Role of Individual councils

20.   Learning from Capital Ambition's early introduction of a 'Mutuality Statement' (see box below) we are consulting on whether we should be asking all councils across the country to sign up to statement that would include:

- Commitment to the key concepts and principles that emerge through this consultation process
- A commitment to engage in a peer led external challenge of corporate health, at least every three to four years
- a commitment to contributing to improvement across local government by engaging in RIEPs, providing councillor and officer peer and other support to other councils and sharing learning and knowledge through a variety of routes including communities of practice etc
- agree performance information collected by Government Office and the inspectorates can be shared with the RIEP/IDeA via the National Improvement and Efficiency Programme Office*
- a commitment to have early, confidential, conversations with the IDeA, or the RIEP or, for councillors, with the relevant IDeA lead political peers about local governance and performance challenges where local government help might be useful
-

CAPITAL AMBITION – The MUTUALITY STATEMENT
MUTUALITY STATEMENT

"This council welcomes the creation of Capital Ambition, the Regional Improvement Partnership in London. It joins with other London councils in recognising that improving services to Londoners requires collective commitment.

This council is responsible for its own improvement but it also acknowledges that this can best be achieved by working with others in London and nationally.

This council undertakes to participate in Capital Ambition by contributing to its work and by working with it for this council's own improvement."

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* The National Improvement and Efficiency Programme Office is hosetd within IDeA and was established to facilitate the implementation of the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy in particular by supporting the RIEPs and ensuring effective collaboration across local government's improvement architecture

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Role of RIEPs

21.   Individual RIEPs will want to take different approaches to their role, they were, after all, established out of a recognition that the geography, patterns of different types of councils and history of different regions necessitate different approaches to collaborating for improvement. So recognizing how the nine RIEPs fulfill their role will vary this paper proposes that RIEPs:

- Confirm their commitment to supporting councils and partnerships in difficulty, ensuring resources are devoted to prevention and support;
- Work out how they will, through regular discussion, keep in touch with the improvement challenges of all the councils in their region, and, in particular, ensure they are aware of any more serious difficulties in individual authorities.
- Agree protocols about the sharing of information by Government Offices and inspectorates with the RIEPs and how it will be used.
- Consider funding a peer review or peer reviews for each council on a regular basis.

22.   The following case studies describe current approach in one region.

Use example from the North East RIEP re information sharing?

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Role of the IDeA

23. The IDeA has considerable, recognized expertise in the deployment of peers to help councils (of all CPA categories) open themselves up to challenge and assist them to bring about improvement. These peer approaches are uniquely powerful in councils facing particular difficulties. The IDeA role is therefore to:

- Provide support and expertise to councils in developing their response to their particular improvement challenges
- The recruitment, accreditation, development and deployment of councillor and officer peers to provide support, challenge and capacity to council
- To act as a coordinating link between the local government improvement bodies and advise and support RIEPS and the LGA members
- Work with the leadership centre and other local government central bodies to ensure well coordinated support is provided.
- Act as a confidential clearing house for people to raise concerns about an authority – these will be then followed up as appropriate by sensitive conversations with the council's senior councillors and/or officers.

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Role of LGA

24.   Political ownership is crucial to the addressing of improvement issues. If the difficulties facing a council are to do with managerial weaknesses it is the authority's councillors who will need to take steps to address these. If the problems are a result of political dysfunction the wider political architecture will need to play a role to support change. The LGA leadership, through its Political Groups and Improvement Boards therefore has a role that includes:

- To challenge poor performance in local authorities and supporting poor performers to improve.
- In particular Improvement Board members will take steps to help through discussions with leading councillors in an authority where barriers to improvement have a political and cross-party dimension.
- Keep under review the effectiveness of local government's improvement architecture (including IDeA, RIEPs, and the Leadership Centre).
- Support local authorities who have come into conflict with government or regulators as a result of legitimate differences of view about the priorities in the area. If necessary, agree with the authority to commission a peer review to come to a view about the reasons for the conflict.
- The LGA Political Group improvement boards will link to council/party groups in particular where dysfunction within a group has a serious adverse effect.

Consultation Questions 5 and 6

How could the respective roles and responsibilities be improved?
The clearing house role was suggested by one of the participants following the December event. If needed is this role best undertaken by the IDeA and/or by the RIEP or by the two working together?

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Government and regulatory regime – "the ask

25.   We propose that, given local government's overall track record on improvement in general and in supporting councils that have faced particular difficulties, and given the principles agreed between local and central government in the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy:

- No action should be taken to serve an improvement notice or otherwise intervene in a council over a corporate, service, or partnership delivery weakness before first giving the council the opportunity to drive its own improvement with help from the rest of local government.
- In practice this would normally mean the council would be asked to call a one-off meeting with the relevant government departments, (and if appropriate inspectorate/audit body), the IDeA, RIEP and GO to discuss the issues and how they will be addressed. Given the importance of political ownership this would need to involve local leading members.
- Inspectorates and the Audit Commission to provide to RIEPS and IDeA (both through the National Improvement and Efficiency Programme Office) information and analysis of the performance of individual councils, regions and local government nationally. This will facilitate the development of relevant help and support at an individual authority, regional and national level.
- Government departments and the regulatory regime should actively address the areas for development identified in section 5 above.

26.   The approach set out in this paper, if adopted, provides a form of 'insurance' for councils and also ensures that as a sector we minimize future risks of failure. If local government signs up to this the reduced risk should also be recognised by government departments and inspectorates through reduced inspection.

Consultation question 7
Are there other actions or commitments that local government should be asking for?

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Illustrative examples

27.   In most instances authorities will be aware of difficulties and will be keen to address them with support from a range of possible sources.   Occasionally, this will not be the case and the last two scenarios describe how we will respond. Some of the scenarios below are described more fully in case studies included as appendix 4.

Scenario	Who can councils turn to when they recognize the challenge?
A has a strong track record on improvement and community leadership but became aware of weaknesses in aspects of children's services that could potentially result in, most importantly, unsafe practice, and also damage to the reputation of the authority. See case study in appendix 4	**Local Government help** Peer review (corporate or service), Inter authority exchange, RIEP, Sector specialists **Other sources of help** Specialist private sector provision, voluntary sector
Work by the Audit Commission identifies concerns about the finances and culture in an authority See Case Study in appendix 4	**Local Government help** Peer review (corporate or service), Inter authority exchange, RIEP, Sector specialists **Other sources of help** Specialist private sector provision, voluntary sector
Problems with a chief officer requires an external reality check	**Local Government help** Other chief Executives in the region/sub region RIEP, IDeA Regional Associate or member peer, Regional LGA **Other sources of help** District Audit, standards board, political parties, CIPFA
Dysfunctional political groups	**Local Government help** IDeA Regional Associate IDeA Political Peers
Serious Adverse Incident Support to handle a crisis	**Local Government help** Mutual support, Political peers, risk management/IDeA regional

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	associate
Problematic political leadership	**Local Government help** LGA Improvement Board members, Regional Associates, IDeA member peers, **Other sources of help** Regional and national political parties, standards board, Audit Commission ethical governance work
Leader and Chief Executive relationship breakdown	**Local Government help** IDeA Political Peers and Regional Associates, Regional Employers.
Scenario	**How should we respond in those rare cases where the challenge is not acknowledged?**
A council has services that are generally performing well but has developed poor relationships between officers and members and between different political groups. These are resulting in poor media coverage and are considered likely to be affecting the quality of decision making	When the issue has been raised with the IDeA the next step would be likely to be a confidential discussion with the leading members in the council and the chief executive to agree how the issues can be addressed.
A partnership is in danger of missing its agreed LAA delivery targets as a result of conflicting priorities and competitive behaviours between the partners.	When the issue has been raised with the IDeA the next step would be likely to be a confidential discussion with the leading members in the council and the chief executive to agree how the issues can be addressed. This may include working in partnership with other public sector improvement bodies such as the Police Improvement Agency.

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Timeline/implementation

Consultation Process	
Early April	Consultation paper issued to council leaders and chief executives, RIEPs, Inspectorates, CLG, other Government departments.
April/May/June	CLG Ministers Commission/inspectorates Regional meetings RIEP lead member meeting RIEP C/E meeting RIEP Directors Meeting Political Group Improvement Boards
30 June	Consultation closes

28.   We will analyse all the consultation responses we receive, including the views expressed at the consultation meetings and review our proposals before publishing a final framework in the Summer for implementation.

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Appendix 1

Critical Success factors for local government's framework

The following areas were seen as being key by the people participating in the December event.

Identifying early warning signs of difficulty

To be effective local government led framework needs to have mechanisms in place to ensure timely recognition of problems and effective support where necessary. There are already mechanisms in place for highlighting signs of difficulties including self awareness, inspectorate reports, intelligence/'talk' within local government and political group structures. However, there is also a recognition that this could be achieved on a more transparent and systematic basis.

While national data provides information on the majority of services, this is still using a national framework on national priorities and misses many of the softer or local issues. Also, it provides information within fairly narrow parameters and sometimes issues can arise in one service that can actually be more symptomatic of wider governance matters. It is important that as a sector we are smart enough to see the links or the potential domino effect. Within the context of CAA, the national focus is quite rightly on the achievement outcomes and where these are not being achieved, the regulators will then look to see if there are issues such as corporate governance issues that are impacting on these matters. Within a sector led framework, we would want to address any corporate governance issues before they have the chance to impact on outcomes and reaches the realms of the inspectors.

Building trust and confidence

a) We need to build the space for confidential discussions and to provide timely support. This needs to include a respect for difference amongst councils.
b) It is important that we are able to develop a framework where councils are open to challenge from peers and where peers are able to provide challenge in an open and constructive way.
c) The framework for sector led engagement also needs to facilitate high levels of trust between the individual council and local government's improvement architecture.
d) Trust, mutual challenge and respect between local and central government must develop further. There is a need for greater clarity of roles and responsibility.

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There needs to be clear water between the respective role of the inspectorates, government offices and the local government improvement architecture for councils in difficulty (and perhaps more generally). The recent document produced by CLG Roles and Responsibilities in the New Performance Framework does not resolve this issue. Also, regulation and the current league table approach, doesn't assist in fostering a climate of trust.

Recognising the importance of and sustaining political ownership

a) A sector led framework should fully recognise the role of politics in supporting councils in difficulty. Political ownership of problems and support to tackle them is vital - at a national, regional and local level. It is essential political parties accept and own problems in their authorities and that they understand the need to take responsibility for being part of the solution.   Local government also needs to have a framework for supporting the increasing number of councils with no overall control.

b) As improvement practitioners we need to understand that the politics can affect improvement. We need to harness the energy when parties are working well and be supportive where this is not the case.

c) There is confusion regarding the role of regional Local Government Associations and the national Local Government Association.

d) There is a tension for all parties between local government practitioners and members of parliament/civil servants who don't have the same grounding. This results in some 'solutions' that don't work within a political landscape and don't assist in the role of local government in leading local communities e.g. directly elected police representatives. There is a need to build better relationships with civil servants and improve their understanding of local government. Similarly, within local government, we also recognise the need to better understand what drives civil servants in their work with local government.   More regular two way secondments may assist with this issue.

A clearer framework of support architecture

a) 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. This could take the form of a clearer support 'map'. Alternatively, the group suggested it might be more helpful to provide a guide to support based on particular scenarios.

b) Outlined below are examples of scenarios and where support could be provided that were developed by the group:

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Appendix 2

Children's services case study

Summary

Midthorpe Council, a 4 star council under CPA, had its JAR in 2007 and this highlighted some areas for improvement, including safeguarding. Midthorpe had previously had good experiences of working with the IDeA to improve particular areas (such as Customer Services) and so approached the agency with a view to them helping them improve their safeguarding services.

Midthorpe wanted to learn from Local Authorities who were more successful in their experiences of integrated children's services and asked that the Beacon authorities of Oxtown Borough Council and Munbridge City be part of the team.

The IDeA and the council jointly decided to use the peer team approach to focus on Safeguarding rather than the whole of children's services. The approach involved two site visits of 2 days each, an initial baseline assessment questionnaire and ongoing support between site visits.

Key learning points

- Learning from other authorities in the same situation as Midthorpe but with more successful experiences
- The process is good, but needs the local authority to plan carefully to ensure that they gain as much as possible from the experiences of others.
- The peer team process is more accessible than an assessment process because it is less threatening and focuses more on development and improvement suggestions. It also allows for the other authorities to keep in touch over the longer term, and come back a few months on to see how things have progressed and help ensure progress.
- The JAR identified areas for improvement which shaped the planning for the peer team process. However, the peer team uncovered the cause of the symptoms identified in the JAR, which ultimately is more useful to the council.
- This kind of sharing (between authorities) is essential because everyone is doing the same things, though in very different ways, dealing with different cultures, different approaches etc.   "It is good to compare experiences with different authorities – you can find different elements of different authorities' approaches that can apply to your own authority".

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- Conversations do happen between colleagues in similar roles in different authorities but not necessarily as critical friends to lead to improvement. In this kind of structured exchange "You can't fail to learn something from someone – it is a two-way process even if it starts as one authority helping another".
- The time commitment is critical. It is time consuming. It is worth investing the time as it enables improvement to happen sooner, but it is not easy to ensure that the time is available. Commitment from executive management in both the receiving and supporting councils is crucial here as they can ensure the resources are necessary. It is not without cost, but the initial investment is worth it as there is always something to learn.
- It would be good to conduct this kind of thing regularly but it is expensive. It can be more forward looking and helpful to the council than a JAR which identifies problems but does not detail how to make improvements.

Background

The JAR identified certain areas for improvement: capacity, thresholds and quality assurance and confirmed some problems that were known about internally but not being dealt with. However, the first session of the peer team approach identified problems with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board. The roles of the members were not clear, and there were knowledge gaps which needed to be addressed before work could progress on thresholds or quality assurance.

The process has brought children's services together as a directorate. It has assisted integration and the process has helped to merge previously separate elements of the service. Problems in safeguarding were tackled as problems for the whole of children's services, and not just one section. This enabled a re-focussing of priorities which resulted in some of the successes (such as reduction in caseloads, case file audit procedures and the redeployment of ACCWs to children's centres where they will work more on prevention than case management).

Who is involved?

The national adviser for the IDeA on Children's Services worked with the local IDeA Regional Associate to plan the approach. An experienced IDeA associate project managed the peer team process and put together the team. This consisted of two officers from Oxtown Borough, and Munbridge City Councils, an official from the NSPCC and a Member Peer.
The Chief Executive of the council enabled resources to be allocated to Safeguarding in order to act on the JAR and peer team recommendations.

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What are the practicalities

An initial baseline survey was distributed to all staff concerned. Although there was a poor return rate initially, after the first site visit this improved. Three two-day site visits were planned. So far, two have taken place.

Visit 1 – October 2007
This involved focus groups and individual interviews with key staff members. Key areas to work on were identified – the LSCB and the link to prevention work. Members of the LSCB were confused by its remit and were rather stuck on processes rather than the more strategic big picture issues. This suggested that it was not possible to work on Quality Assurance or Thresholds until this area was dealt with.

It became clear that there needed to be better connections with the Prevention Team. Without doing this, the capacity of safeguarding could not be improved.

Visit 2 – Dec 2007
This involved more interviews and some practice sharing seminars.

What is the impact / what has happened as a result?

- Reducing caseloads through creative means – looking at caseloads across the whole of children's services and re-focussing priorities. Some cases moved from case management (Children in Need and Child Protection) to YOS and Leaving Care. This has had an impact on other areas of the directorate, which has had mixed responses. However, there is an acceptance that the priorities had to change.
- IRT manager moving on secondment to support the CAF facilitator and to establish the Children & Families team and children's centres. This brings together the experiences from IRT and safeguarding and enables the manager to be more cross cutting in focus and helps ensure that safeguarding cuts across all children's services.
- Establishing a recruitment & retention strategy
- Using the Oxtown Borough "Integrated Working Practices" Toolkit, and adapting it to suit Midthorpe. This is being used successfully.
- There has been a root & branch review of the LSCB – membership, organisation, and accountability. This has looked at the role of the members of the LSCB and it has been decided to appoint an independent chair. This is the model adopted successfully in Munbridge. There is now an interim chair from the Health sector. Midthorpe is currently gathering job descriptions of LSCB

part of the **LGA** group

Chairs from across the country and will be advertising with a view to the new independent chair starting in the autumn.

- Change in organisation of the ACCWs – moving them to the Children's Centres and increasing the number of qualified social workers in caseload.
- Improvement in reporting to LSCB. E.g. they thought they weren't getting any performance data. Actually they were, but not in an accessible format. There are now procedures in place to summarise that data to be more useful. There is a move to reorganise the whole way that information is presented to the LSCB.

What could have been done differently?

- Involving all the senior managers across Children's services from the start, ensuring that they all knew what was happening and that all their staff were aware.
- Managing the second visit better – in some ways this was an opportunity missed as those who took part in the workshops were not really aware of what was expected of them and therefore they didn't work as well as they could have.
- Staying in silos is not helpful. It would have been possible to look at the capacity in safeguarding post-JAR but it wasn't initially seen as a problem for everyone in children's services. Now that it is, ways of working have changed to be more integrated.
- Communication in children's services has improved internally, but not yet with external partners.

Critical Success Factors

- Having information reflected back to senior managers about what is really going on for frontline staff.
- Building up a two-way relationship with the other local authorities
- Learning from the experiences of two Beacon authorities – includes visits to Beacon authorities.
- Having buy-in from the Corporate Centre – the Chief Executive was key to allocating extra resources in order to make the changes which were needed to improve.
- "Useful to talk to people who have grappled with the same things"
- Process managed by a credible organisation with an appropriate team for the circumstances

What next?

There are two more visits planned, in May (looking at culture change within the Safeguarding team) and autumn.

- Exploring the possibility of mentoring the Lead member for Children's Services and for the chair of Scrutiny so as to learn from other LAs how to integrate children's services into scrutiny, and how to ensure that Safeguarding also runs through scrutiny appropriately.
- There is a move to look at the role of the health sector – can they take on some of the cases? Is some of the work more appropriately dealt with by health workers?
- Accountability is probably an issue for the council as a whole, not just children's services. It therefore helps the whole council if children's services can model improvements. This is the advantage of having the corporate centre on board throughout the process
- The LSCB has not been fully linked in with either the LA before, or with the scrutiny process. This is why there is likely to be some mentoring for the scrutiny chair as well as for the Lead Member for children's services.
- It is suspected that the council has yet to achieve change in perceptions of other agencies.

Include 2 more case studies

part of the **LGA group**

Appendix 3
List of attendees at local government led improvement event

David Parsons, Chair of the Improvement Board and leader of Leicestershire Council
Gerald Vernon Jackson – Leader, Portsmouth City Council
Ray Frost – Deputy Leader, Teignbridge District Council
Kenneth Lupton – Leader, Stockton on Tees Borough Council
Richard Kemp – Deputy Chair – LGA/Liverpool City Council
Peter Webb – Leader, North Dorset District Council
David Williams – Cabinet Member for Communities, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames
Mike Cuff – Chief Executive, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Colin Hilton – Chief Executive, Liverpool City Council
Alastair Robertson – Managing Director, Watford Borough Council
Paul Sheehan - Chief Executive, Walsall Council
Bryony Rudkin – Suffolk County Council
John Freeman - Director of Children's Services, Dudley
Darra Singh – Chief Executive, London Borough of Ealing
Dame Sally Powell – Councillor, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
Clyde Loakes – Leader, London Borough of Waltham Forest
Paul Bettison – Leader, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
Sue Banks – Assistant Director, West Midlands Regional Improvement & Efficiency Partnership
Owen Williams –Chief Executive, Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
Maggie Sullivan – Head of Independent Group, LGA
Liz Goodall – Chief Executive, North Dorset District Council
Helen Holland – Leader, Bristol City Council
William Brooks – Head of Conservative Group Office and Portfolio Holder for Housing, London Borough of Ealing
Nathan Yeowell – Head of Labour Group Office, LGA
Lucy de Groot, Executive Director, IDeA
John Hayes – Director, Services, IDeA
Annette Madden – Interim Programme Director, Improvement & Performance, LGA
Dennis Skinner – Regional Associate National Co-Ordination, IDeA
Angela Page – Policy Adviser, LGA
Andrew Cozens - Strategic Adviser - Children, Adults & Health Services, IDeA
Caroline Abrahams – Programme Director, LGA Policy, LGA
Mandy James – CAA Programme Development Manager, IDeA
Jo Webb – Regional Associate, Yorkshire and the Humber, IDeA