

Taking the Lead

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report updates the Improvement Programme Board on progress in implementing “Taking the Lead”, invites members to offer guidance on future activity and agree the proposed new approach to peer challenge set out at paragraph 6.

Recommendation

The Board is asked to offer guidance on future activity and agree the proposed new approach to peer challenge set out at paragraph 6.

Action

To pursue next steps in the light of Members’ discussion.

Contact officers: Dennis Skinner; Head of Leadership and Productivity,
Tel 020 7664 3017 Email Dennis.skinner@local.gov.uk

Nick Easton, Senior Adviser
Tel 020 7664 3278 Email nick.easton@local.gov.uk

Taking the Lead

Background

1. At the last Board meeting in July, Members received a full six month progress report on implementing “Taking the Lead” since its initial launch and publication. The Board recognised that good progress had been made in developing and delivering the LG Group seven point support offer but that there was still a lot to be done in terms of:
 - 1.1 promoting the 7 point offer and councils take up of the tools (e.g. signing councils up to have a peer challenge);
 - 1.2 finalising the support tools with councils (e.g. some of the accountability tools, LG Inform);
 - 1.3 engraining the approach in other service areas;
 - 1.4 strengthening the way we understand performance in the sector as a whole and individual councils facing performance challenges;
 - 1.5 developing proposals to monitor and evaluate the success of the approach and the individual tools.

Members also asked that the terminology around “self regulation” be re-examined.

2. This report updates the Board on progress in each of the five areas identified above, but with a particular emphasis on the LG Group’s peer challenge offer.

Promoting awareness and take -up

3. We have undertaken a wide range of marketing and communications activity to promote the approach and the LG Group support offer to the sector. We have commissioned some work to assess the effectiveness of our communications activity and this, along with delegate feedback from the July series of road shows will help inform a refreshed communications strategy for the Autumn. This is likely to focus on promoting the benefits of the support tools from the perspective of early users. As part of this process we will review the terminology around “self regulation” and report back to Lead Members.
4. The proposed series of Autumn road shows for Leaders and Chief Executives is being developed in partnership with regional LGAs and Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships to ensure that the focus of the event meets the needs of councils in the area and to maximise attendance. It is also hoped that they will provide an opportunity for the LGA Chairman to strengthen relationships with member authorities.

Item 4

Seven point support offer – peer challenge

5. Good progress has been made in developing the tools that underpin the approach and the report to the last meeting reminded the Board what we said we would provide and set out what we have achieved so far.
6. We have invested a lot of effort – working with councils – to refresh our approach to peer challenge so that it is more flexible and better able to meet the varying needs of individual councils. Key elements to note are that:
 - 6.1 The peer challenge will be improvement focussed;
 - 6.2 The scope will be flexible (this is not an assessment against a national benchmark) and agreed with the council(s) concerned through an initial scoping meeting, although there will be a small core component around leadership and corporate capacity;
 - 6.3 Depending on the agreed focus the peer challenge can be delivered for one or a number of councils and can also involve local partners;
 - 6.4 The peer challenge will be undertaken at a time which (subject to resources) best suits the requirements of the council(s);
 - 6.5 Results will be fed back to the council(s) throughout the process and at the close, through a roundtable discussion and feedback letter. We will encourage councils to make the results of the peer challenge, and their response to it, available publicly.

A short promotional publication setting out the benefits of peer challenge and promoting the Group's new flexible offer along the lines outlined above will be published later in September.

7. The first tranche of peer challenges are in the process of being delivered from July into the Autumn. Feedback about the new more flexible approach has been very positive as illustrated by the following quotes:

'the peer challenge was immensely useful' - Ann Ducker, Leader, South Oxfordshire

'I found the process very rewarding and was impressed with the clarity of the team's findings at the end of the week. They really got beneath the skin of the two councils and addressed exactly the right issues in their recommendations.'
– Matthew Barber, Leader, Vale of White Horse

'perhaps the most important endorsement I can give the peer challenge is that it was nothing like CPA or CAA. We didn't feel that we were being inspected, rather that we had critical friends with us who wanted to put forward positive ideas for how we could improve. We achieved as much as we have done'

Item 4

through previous inspections but with about ten per cent of the effort.’ – David Buckle, Chief Executive, South Oxon & Vale of White Horse

Taking the Lead – and other service areas

8. It has been one of the Board’s objectives to ensure that the core elements of sector self regulation and improvement, i.e. the importance of robust comparable data; self evaluation; and peer challenge are built into other key service areas. The Board has been kept updated about the good progress being made in both adult social care and children’s services – and because of the importance and scale of the new approach to children’s services improvement there is a separate item on the agenda for this meeting.

Understanding performance

9. At the last meeting Members received a report from Steve Freer, Chair of the independent Advisory Board on self regulation and improvement. Within that report, the Advisory Board said that the task of detecting, highlighting and taking action in respect of poor performance by individual authorities was one of the most challenging issues facing the LG Group. It said it was important that the Group develops a systematic approach to trying to identify the early warning signs of possible major difficulties and offering early support.
10. Members agreed with the need to develop a more systematic approach and we are currently exploring how we can do this by exploiting the opportunities provided by:
 - 10.1 Our strengthened team of Principal and Senior Advisers
 - 10.2 The on-going information LG Inform will provide
 - 10.3 Links to other parts of the sector.

We are also meeting with Government Departments and the Inspectorates to explore how we can exploit the intelligence they hold about performance. Proposals for strengthening this approach will be discussed with Lead Members through the Performance Support Panel.

Monitoring and Evaluation

11. Members have stressed the importance they attach to reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of “Taking the Lead” - both in terms of the take up of the approach and use of the support tools but also in terms of the extent to which this has contributed to improved performance.

Item 4

12. Officers are currently exploring evaluation options for discussion with the independent Advisory Board in September and will then be in a position to report to the Improvement Board later in the Autumn.

Other related issues – the future of local public audit

13. In our response to the DCLG consultation on the future of local public audit the LGG called for – amongst other things - greater clarity around the timetable for allowing councils to appoint their own auditors.
14. DCLG has been considering the best route for transferring the Audit Commission's in-house practice to the private sector and decided that this should be by way of outsourcing the work, as opposed to creating an independent company which could be sold. Subsequently it has been considering how long the outsourced contracts should be with options ranging from three to five years from 2012/13. Whilst longer contracts might achieve greater value for money they would also delay the point at which councils would be free to appoint their own auditors (if the contracts were for five years then the first year for which councils will have been able to appoint their own auditors will not be until 2017/18). DCLG recognise councils' interest in this trade off which they will discuss with the sector once they have secured three and five year bids from audit firms.

Financial Implications

15. There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.