

## **Audit and Scrutiny Panel Scrutiny Reviews - the LGA's Direct Offer to Councils**

### **Purpose of report**

For review and direction.

### **Summary**

In 2011/12 the LGA's Audit and Scrutiny Panel set up two scrutiny groups - one to review the LGA's direct offer to councils, the other to review the LGA's overheads. This second group has now reviewed the recently finalised independent benchmarking report on the Liberata contract and has made recommendations on this to Resources Panel to inform their decision on the future of the contract.

The first scrutiny group has also finished its work and its final report which includes a number of recommendations is attached. Cllr David Neighbour, the chair of the group, will be attending Leadership Board to present the task group's findings.

A draft action plan setting out management's response to the recommendations is attached at **Appendix A**.

### **Recommendation**

That members review the attached scrutiny report from the Audit and Scrutiny Panel on the LGA's direct offer to councils.

### **Action**

To implement the recommendations – Director of Communications and Head of Business Development.

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## **Audit and Scrutiny Panel Scrutiny Review - the LGA's Direct Offer to Councils**

### **Introduction**

1. This report summarises the conclusions of a small task group established by the LGA Audit and Scrutiny Panel to look at the impact and effectiveness of the LGA's direct offer to local authorities.
2. The members of the task group were Cllrs David Neighbour, Jeff Green, Andrew Bowles, Imogen Walker and Susan Woodward.
3. The task group's recommendations have been endorsed by the LGA's Audit and Scrutiny Panel.
4. A draft action plan which has been prepared in response to the Panel's recommendations is attached at **Appendix A**.

### **Methodology**

5. In examining the LGA's direct offer to local authorities, we realised that a significant amount of research, over a very broad range of the LGA's activities, would be required. Our intention has been to carry out as comprehensive as possible an investigation of the offer – looking both at:
  - 5.1 whether the offer is fit for purpose, and meets local government's needs; and
  - 5.2 whether the offer is communicated effectively both to member councils and to individual councillors.
6. In coming to a judgment on both of these issues we have considered the services that the LGA provides and offers in the following areas:
  - 6.1 The LGA's lobbying work
  - 6.2 Our online offer
  - 6.3 Peer challenges
  - 6.4 Our direct support to councils
  - 6.5 Leadership support
  - 6.6 Workforce support
  - 6.7 Productivity support
  - 6.8 Other core services such as the political group offices and legal advice
  - 6.9 Direct communications including First magazine and email briefings
  - 6.10 Conferences and events.
7. We used sessions in January and February to carry out a mapping exercise, receiving and considering a wide range of paper evidence on the above elements of the offer. This comprised internal LGA management information, surveys of councils and councillors carried out recently by the LGA and other, independently-produced information. We also received oral evidence from LGA staff. This provided us with the evidence we needed to develop some hypotheses, which we tested by taking more

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detailed evidence on certain elements of the offer which the initial mapping exercise suggested deserved further investigation, either because of their relative importance or because they presented areas where we might offer ideas for improvement. Subsequent meetings in March, May and June allowed us to do this.

8. We did not carry out a detailed, cross-sector survey or evidence-gathering exercise to supplement this evidence. This was because the LGA already has a significant amount of user information at its disposal – particularly for electronic elements of the offer, but also in terms of engagement on improvement and user surveys on particular elements of the offer (for example, a survey on members' perceptions of First magazine).
9. We have been able to add value by synthesising and evaluating a range of different pre-existing evidence sources, and offering an independent interpretation and member perspective on what those sources mean, individually and collectively, for the work that the LGA does.
10. We understand that a full customer survey is planned during 2012, and we recommend that, amongst other things, this is used to explore further the issues identified by us in this scrutiny review.

**Hypotheses and summary of recommendations**

11. Following initial evidence-gathering we set out a number of hypotheses which were then tested through further analysis of evidence, including discussions with LGA officers. These hypotheses were:
  - 11.1 Member access to information could be improved
  - 11.2 The LGA's offer to backbenchers could be strengthened
  - 11.3 The LGA's approach to relationship management could be strengthened
  - 11.4 The added value from the LGA's improvement offer needs to be made clearer.
12. The findings and recommendations below are based on these hypotheses, which were broadly substantiated by the evidence gathered. **They reflect our central conclusion – made early on in the process – that the offer itself is fundamentally sound, and provides a valuable and comprehensive service to member councils and councillors, but that the way that the LGA communicates this offer could be improved.**

**Summary of findings**

13. We found that the LGA's offer to backbenchers, and to councillors generally, is potentially extremely strong, but that the LGA is not sufficiently targeted in the way that this is communicated.
14. For example, the Knowledge Hub and LG Inform both provide excellent opportunities for councillors to find out more about their own councils, and sharing information about how other authorities do things. Both tools are equally valuable to executive members, scrutiny members and other backbench councillors, but the opportunities do need to be highlighted in order to demonstrate their utility. Knowledge Hub presents particular opportunities for member networking but, again, needs to be presented in such a way that demonstrates a clear reason why members should adopt it as a way of working.

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Barriers to using the Knowledge Hub need to be carefully reviewed as it is developed, including the fact that it is still quite difficult to access.

15. In looking at First magazine, we did consider that backbench and opposition councillors might be less likely to read it. We examined a recent survey of First readers to see how the magazine's design and content might be changed, recognising in doing so that non-readers will, by definition, not have completed the survey. First is an extremely valuable tool for communicating with councillors. At this stage we do not consider it realistic to move to online-only provision of information to elected members but the online version of the magazine should be promoted more to those members who might prefer to receive information in this way than in hard copy.
16. Both of these considerations led us to our main finding on the offer to individual councillors – that the LGA should better segment its audience, recognising that different types of councillor are likely to have different interests, skills and experiences. This extends into being able to use this information to more accurately plan conferences and events to meet the needs of members – particularly in determining (for example) whether more regional events on given topics might be required.
17. In considering the LGA's approach to relationship management, we found that the perception existed that there was a "squeezed middle" of authorities – those exhibiting neither the hallmarks of poor, or excellent, performance and who might consider that they do not benefit from the support of the LGA's Principal Advisers. There is a tension here – Principal Advisers need to prioritise their time on those areas where they can add most value through their work, but equally engagement across all authorities in a given region is a key part of the role, as the LGA's main point of contact with local authorities.
18. The building up of a positive and honest relationship between councils and Principal Advisers – and through the peer review process – is crucial, to provide a safe space for those involved to speak candidly about making improvements. To ensure that Principal Advisers are able to gather accurate information about councils' plans and attitudes, more emphasis should be made on engaging with elected members.
19. Notwithstanding this, we recognise that Principal Advisers' capacity is limited, and we consider that there is work that others engaged directly with the LGA – including the lead member peers and also other members of the staff team – can do to share some of this load. More effective systems for briefing and sharing information about councils' engagement with the LGA should help to spread some of the responsibility for engaging at local level.
20. We also found that there is scope to improve awareness and understanding of the full range of the LGA's improvement offer, in particular the bespoke, direct support that is available to councils with performance issues. We found that the benefits of the LGA's peer reviews and peer challenges could also be better communicated.

## **Recommendations**

### **21. Recommendation 1 – improve member access to information, for example by:**

- 21.1 the LGA taking steps to segment its audiences and to provide more targeted information accordingly;
- 21.2 developing the LGA website so that the presentation of the LGA's work is more compelling, based on the issues likely to be of interest to councillors rather than just being structured round the work of the LGA boards;
- 21.3 ensuring that the LGA's conferences and events are directly driven by the needs of councillors, including the option of holding more regional events;
- 21.4 communicating directly with all councillors on the LGA's lobbying successes, to build ownership and commitment to the LGA.

### **22. Recommendation 2 - widen the range of councillors targeted by the LGA, with a particular focus on backbenchers, for example by:**

- 22.1 developing a clear narrative about the offer to backbenchers and use this as the basis for a concerted campaign to backbenchers;
- 22.2 ensuring that backbenchers are aware of and have access to the LGA's leadership programmes;
- 22.3 targeting elements of the website and also the LGA's online services, especially Knowledge Hub and LG Inform, directly at backbenchers, and also regularly bringing to their attention that First magazine can be accessed online;
- 22.4 improving the general information about the LGA as an organisation, particularly on the website, with the benefits of membership being more clearly and compellingly explained.

### **23. Recommendation 3 – strengthen the LGA's approach to relationship management, for example by:**

- 23.1 ensuring that the Principal Advisers are supported by the wider LGA workforce in managing relationships with authorities, and that attention is given to engaging with authorities in the "squeezed middle" as well as those who require high levels of support or who are at the leading edge;
- 23.2 to support this wider, more systematic engagement by LGA officers, developing a system for recording contact with councils and the take-up of LGA services, building on the mapping exercise carried out for 2011/12;
- 23.3 ensuring that relationships are maintained with key members in each council, as well as with senior officers, ensuring that the Principal Advisers work with the lead member peers to achieve this.

### **24. Recommendation 4 – clearly communicate the LGA's improvement offer to councils, for example by:**

- 24.1 communicating a clear menu of the improvement support available to authorities, in particular on the LGA website;
- 24.2 capturing and communicating the experiences and benefits of peer challenges from the perspective of individual authorities and also individual peers;

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- 24.3 whilst maintaining confidentiality, raising the profile of the LGA's direct support to councils with performance issues, in particular positioning the LGA as the place members can go to for an independent view.
25. **Recommendation 5 – establish a member-level Communications Reference Group to allow the LGA to consult with a cross-section of councillors on communication and marketing plans and ideas as they develop**

**SCRUTINY PANEL REVIEW OF THE LGA'S MEMBERSHIP OFFER**

**ACTION PLAN**

RECOMMENDATION	OWNER	ACTIONS	TIMESCALE	PROGRESS
<b>Improve members' access to information</b>				
1. Take steps to segment audiences and provide more targeted information	David Holdstock	Undertake segmented membership survey to set basis for greater targetting	October 2012	Agreed by Leadership Board 19/9/12. Survey begins w/c 8 Oct and is due to finish mid-end Nov
	Claire Holloway/ Andrea Patrick	Send a bespoke membership pack to every councillor.	April 2013	Work will begin on new packs Autumn 2012
2. Develop the LGA website so that presentation is more compelling and structured around members' interests rather than boards	David Holdstock/ Sarah Jennings	Establish communications reference group to oversee	Sept 2012 set up Nov 2012 meet	First meeting to take place following results of memberships survey
		Analyse monthly website statistics	Monthly	In place
3. Ensure events programme reflects members' interests – include more regional events	Amanda Cowen	Analyse actual numbers of events in and out of London	October 2012	Included in report to Leadership Board
	Sarah Jennings Ceri Wilde	Include map-based access to events info on website	December 2012	Internal communications briefed
4. Communicate directly with councillors on LGA lobbying successes	David Holdstock	Include proposals in Comms strategy	Awaiting outcome of membership survey.	Strategy to Leadership Board Feb 2013
	HGOs	Regular newsletters	Ongoing	In place
	Tom Coales	Chairman's weekly message to leaders	Ongoing	In place

RECOMMENDATION	OWNER	ACTIONS	TIMESCALE	PROGRESS
<b>Widen range of councillors targeted, with particular focus on backbenchers</b>				
5. Develop a clear narrative about our offer to backbenchers as the basis for a concerted campaign	David Holdstock/ Claire Holloway	Develop easy to find web pages on membership offer, including council-by-council info.	October 2012	Draft pages prepared.
	HGOs	Circulate bespoke membership offer to all backbenchers	April 2012	First done in 2012 – positive feedback from backbenchers.
6. Ensure backbenchers are aware of and have access to LGA leadership programmes	Pascoe Sawyers	New Councillors' Roadshows July - Sept 2012	Held in all regions except SW.	LGA leadership programmes promoted at roadshows
	HGOs	Improved publicity		
7. Target elements of the website, and online services directly at backbenchers – especially Knowledge Hub and LG Inform and first online	Dennis Skinner	Series of regional sessions for backbenchers	TBC	Relaunch of LG Inform set for March 2013
8. Improve general information about LGA as an organisation, particularly on the website, with benefits of membership more clearly and compellingly explained.		See actions 2 and 5		
	Cathy Boyle Alison Edwards	Enhanced new members' packs welcome incorporating Councillors' Guide and invitations to New Councillors' Roadshows	From May 2013 (after local elections)	HGOs contributing to improved Councillors' Guides
<b>Strengthen the LGA's approach to relationship management</b>				
9. Ensure Principal Advisers are supported by the wider LGA workforce in managing relationships with councils and that attention is given to the "squeezed middle" as well as highest and lowest performing	Michael Coughlin	Structured approach to programme of visits for Chairman, CX, directors, PAs.	Quarterly planning and review meetings with PAs, HGOs, Exec Office	Schedule of visits reported as part of CX monthly report
	HGOs	Programmes of contact via Group Executives, Group Improvement Boards, Lead Peers	Ongoing	New Lead Peers appointed

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RECOMMENDATION	OWNER	ACTIONS	TIMESCALE	PROGRESS
10. Develop a system of recording contact with councils and take up of LGA services	LG Development	New CRM/Membership site	Incorporated in new IT strategy	Developing implementation plans
11. Ensure that relationships are maintained with key members in councils as well as officers, using lead peers	HGOs	Develop programmes of contact via Group Executives and Lead Peers	Ongoing	New Lead Peers appointed
<b>Clearly communicate the LGA's improvement offer to councils</b>				
12. Communicate a clear menu of improvement support available, in particular on the LGA website	Dennis Skinner Sarah Jennings	"Sector led improvement in local government" – a publication aimed at councillors to be produced	Publication launched at LGA conference	
13. Capture and communicate the experiences and benefits of peer challenges from the perspective of individual councils and of peers	HGOs Andy Bates	Establish process for recording information	By 31 March 2013	Meeting between LG Leadership and HGOs 16 Oct
14. Whilst maintaining confidentiality, raise the profile of the LGA's direct support to councils with performance issues, positioning the LGA as the place members can go for an independent view.	HGOs Dennis Skinner	LGA's direct support offer raised by Principal and Senior advisors at visits to councils. National and regional peers to raise with councillors		
<b>Establish a member-level Communications Reference Group to allow the LGA to consult with a cross section of councillors on communication and marketing plans and ideas as they develop</b>				
15. Establish Communications Reference Group	David Holdstock Sarah Jennings	See recommendation 2	Sept 2012 set up Nov 2012 meet	