

11 October 2010

Item 3

Self-regulation and Improvement

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction

Summary

This report provides an overview of the Local Government Group's consultation on Sector Self-regulation and Improvement, and provides early proposals for community safety improvement within this context.

Recommendation

Members are invited to comment on the principles underpinning the consultation; and on the proposed approach to community safety improvement.

Action

As directed by the Board

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Self regulation and improvement

Background

1. At the September meeting the Board received a report on the Revenue Support Grant Bid which outlined the LG Group offer to Government on the future of the 'top-slice' which currently goes to nine central organisations. The report also outlined the LG Group's offer of a new approach to self regulation and improvement.
2. As the Government has rapidly dismantled the local government performance framework – abolishing the Comprehensive Area Assessment - the Local Government Group, under the direction of the Improvement Board is now consulting local authorities on the future of assessment and regulation. These proposals set out an ambitious approach to sector self regulation and the role of the LG Group. The proposals are designed to complement the steps already made by the government to promote localism, transparency and an increased role for local people in running their own affairs. The consultation closes on 1 November 2010.

Sector self regulation and improvement

3. The LG Group's consultation proposals look to put improvement and assessment in the hands of councils, and are based on the principles that councils are responsible for their own performance, are accountable to their local communities and have collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

In summary the proposals include:

- 3.1 Strengthening accountability through transparency, with councils and partners making on-going performance information available to the public in ways that they can understand and use;
- 3.2 Annual reports from the council and partners to local people about the quality of life and services in their areas;
- 3.3 Robust peer challenge – involving local people and the business and voluntary sectors. Each council would determine the frequency but this would usually be at least every three years; and
- 3.4 A commitment from the sector to manage the risk of underperformance by putting in place an early warning system which would enable us to identify councils facing real challenges so that support can be provided and service failure avoided.

Other processes such as statutory financial audit would need to continue, providing assurance to both communities and to Government.

Early Warning Signals

4. A key element of this proposed new sector owned approach is the commitment to spot difficulties. This will be challenging and complex to get right, not least in the community safety arena. The LG Group will, working with councils, political party groups, professional groups and Inspectorates, develop agreed “early warning signals” and arrangements to share intelligence at an early stage. From this, support from within the sector will be offered with central intervention and formal inspection being a last resort.
5. This approach will be politically owned and led through the LGA’s political groups and the LG Group’s Improvement Programme Board.

National Indicators

6. In the absence of Local Area Agreement and the National Indicator Set (which included 35 community safety indicators), the paper proposes that the LG Group agrees with government a small number of national outcomes (up to 5) that councils will deliver along with local priorities. The national outcomes would be complemented by a small number of national indicators (up to 10).

Members are invited to comment on:

- 6.1 the underpinning principles on which these proposals are based – in particular that councils have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector and will collaborate both to give and receive support?
- 6.2 does the approach provide the right balance between local accountability and external assessment?

Implications for Community safety

Driving improvement

7. Alongside the abolition of the Public Service Agreements and Comprehensive Area Assessment there have been a number of changes to reduce central performance management of community safety. The confidence target and the Policing Pledge have been abolished and the Home Office’s consultation ‘*Policing in the 21st Century*’ aims to go further in reducing the data burden placed on police forces.
8. We have repeatedly said that the key information the public would like to know is what the police and partners are doing to address crime and disorder issues

in their neighbourhood. We have therefore supported moves to publish real time crime maps and data online and have argued for this to be joined up with other agencies, and made user-friendly and meaningful. Whilst much of this work is already underway, the proposals included in the consultation would be a step change for Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs). There would need to be some detailed technical work as the Home Office via iQuanta holds much of the crime data, including some sophisticated comparability data. CSPs already have real experience in making this information meaningful, and setting figures in context to avoid unnecessarily raising fear of crime levels in communities. Again, CSPs are experienced in producing annual reports to local people and the new scrutiny powers are being increasingly used and provide a valuable opportunity for elected Members to examine crime and disorder issues in detail.

Underperformance and sector support

9. In the past the Home Office has taken a centrally driven interventionist approach to performance and improvement of CSPs and has struggled to embrace a more devolved approach. For example, Ministers and officials were uncomfortable with Local Area Agreements and a local determined choice of indicators in the National Indicator Set.
10. There is a complicated landscape of support for community safety. Government has embarked on a multitude of initiatives and schemes, most of which are short term and responsive and without any long term sustainability. However, it is increasingly apparent that the legitimacy and accountability for some of these improvement activities are unclear, and sit uneasily with the Government's commitment to localism.
11. Over the past two years confidence in local government to take a role in improvement in CSPs has markedly increased. This can be attributed to a number of issues: as a result of a Public Service Agreement target around public confidence on crime where it was widely acknowledged that local government has the knowledge and expertise to deliver the target; and through LG Improvement and Development's peer support programme, which the Group has developed alongside Home Office activity and has been regarded as successful, particularly around the benefits of involving locally elected politicians in improvement.

LG Group Activity

12. As reported to the Board in September, for each of the last two years improvement work on community safety has been funded from a small allocation of £150,000 from the current top-slice allocation to LG Improvement and Development. The 20 peer reviews conducted to date have provided solid evidence that sector led support is successful in securing tangible outcomes.

13. Going forward, provided funding allows, we would envisage continuing community safety peer support, although re-engineering the structure and format to provide a broader range of themed reviews and some more specialist services, including productivity and efficiency reviews. Moving peer reviews more into the public arena and taking a more inclusive approach involving the voluntary sector and business will make for a more creative and challenging process.
14. Subject to the Board's views, our more ambitious proposal is for the LG Group to become a strategic partner with the Home Office, and operate as a commissioning body to provide a wide range of community safety improvement services for the sector. Although LG Improvement and Development services would be central to this arrangement, this would open up an opportunity to market make, opening up the sector to a wide range of providers – voluntary and private - improving the quality of support offered whilst driving down the cost. We believe this would support innovation and creativity in designing community safety improvement services and would provide a new opportunity to involve communities in the design of the improvement activities through a more in-depth discussion about solving intransigent crime problems. We are well placed to take on this role as we already have access to capacity and expertise which is credible and influential with CSPs and local politicians and we have a vast network of community safety contacts.

Although there would be much detail to be worked out, Members are invited to comment on this approach in principle.

Financial Implications

15. We would need to have a discussion with the Home Office about redirecting a potential £2m fund for central improvement community safety activity. Resources within the LG Group would also need some redistribution in order to set up this enhanced commissioning role.