

Minutes of last Improvement & Innovation Board meeting

Improvement & Innovation Board

Friday, 21 July 2023

Hybrid Meeting - 18 Smith Square and Online

Attendance

An attendance list is attached as [Appendix A](#)

Item	Decisions and actions
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1	Welcome, apologies and substitutes, declarations of interest
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The Chair welcomed members to the last meeting of the LGA year. She thanked members for their hard work and commitment during the year and paid tribute to those who were standing down from the Board, notably Cllr Neil Prior and Cllr Liz Green (lead members) and former Cllr Mike Haines (Independent Group National Lead Peer).

Apologies were received from Cllr Laura Beddow, Cllr Brigid Jones, Cllr Alan Connett and Mayor Damien Egan.

There were no declarations of interest.

2	Minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 May 2023
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The minutes of the meeting held on 26 May 2023 were agreed as an accurate record. There were no matters arising.

3	The Sector Support Programme 2023/24 and Q1 Reporting Update
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Members received a confidential update on Q1 performance for the 2023/24 Sector Support Programme.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** the update.

4	Office for Local Government (Oflog) launch
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The Chair invited Juliet Whitworth (JW), Head of Research and Information, to introduce the update.

JW provided members with an update on Oflog, following its formal launch at the LGA Conference on 4 July. Disappointingly, the new Oflog datasets do not make use of data in the LGA's LG Inform tool. JW showed

members a comparison between the new Oflog tool and LG Inform and then ran through the concerns that the LGA still has over Oflog. Moving forward, as DLUHC starts to develop new data topics, the LGA will continue to feed through any sector concerns and to argue for a role for LG Inform.

Members' comments and questions:

- It was argued that as Oflog was now here to stay, it was important that the LGA had an effective formalised process for engaging with it and influencing its agenda and ways of working. JW said that engagement was currently on 2 levels – (i) fortnightly meetings with officials discussing more practical issues; and (ii) higher level meetings between the IIB Chair, DS and the Interim Chair and Chief Executive of Oflog, where broader concerns can be raised. The latter had proven constructive in recent weeks.
- Concern was expressed about potential extension of the Oflog remit to include sending in experts and other senior local government figures to councils where Oflog data flagged up concerns. This was considered to be a clear encroachment onto the CPC process and local democratic accountability and the LGA should push strongly against it.
- It was suggested that duplication of data provision by councils could have a financial/resource impact which should be factored in. Concerns were also raised about the quality and timeliness of the data used by Oflog, which could be erroneously used by the public and others to judge the performance of their council. JW clarified that, at the moment, Oflog was using data already submitted by councils, and so there is no duplication. JW also explained that the main concern was that Oflog had taken the decision to use only data from the last year when it was available for all metrics – 2020/21. Therefore, it could not be reliably used as an up to date tool for spotting potential problems with councils.
- Confidence and trust in the LGA's CPC process had been built up over a number of years and it was often the small number of councils that didn't engage with the process that had subsequently encountered problems.
- It was pointed out that it was often failures of governance, management and leadership that led to councils getting into difficulty and this could not easily be measured or picked up by an Oflog metric. The LGA's system of CPC and regional teams on the ground was much better placed to detect these issues.

DS reported on the potential 5 additional areas of work identified by Oflog in their policy paper issued at the launch – (i) early warning conversations with councils using experts and others; (ii) best practice webinars; (iii) rationalising data; (iv) improving the capacity of the sector to use data; and (v) thematic reviews to capture best practice. DS said that he shared the concerns expressed by members about Oflog encroaching on the CPC process but that further work on (ii) – (v) could, on the face of it, be beneficial to councils, and officers would work constructively with Oflog on these. The Chair added that the LGA as a whole needed to be ready to engage with Oflog at the earliest opportunity on the concerns raised by members as events were likely to develop quickly.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** the newly launched Office for Local Government and proposed next steps outlined in paragraph 13 of the report.

5 Assurance Framework for Local Government

The Chair invited Heather Wills (HW), Principal Adviser Improvement, to introduce the report.

HW set out some of the background to the project for members and explained that the first stage involved mapping all the current elements which provide assurance for local government and support improvement. Officers were now working with the sector, professional associations and others to quantify the current framework. This work was being informed by a Sounding Board, comprising representatives from CIPFA, SOLACE and Lawyers in Local Government. This current engagement would run until the end of August with the results being reported to Improvement and Innovation Board and LGA Board in October 2023. Members would then be asked to agree a second phase of engagement with the sector to consider the potential for improvements to the current framework. Parallel to this, officers were working on a response to the Government's recent consultation on draft statutory guidance on the Best Value duty and members were asked to delegate sign off of this response to IIB Lead Members.

Members' comments and questions:

- Clarification was sought on the audience for the map and framework and what it was looking to achieve. HW explained that this exercise was a starting point aimed at shining a light on the complexity of the current system. Ultimately it was hoped that a version could be developed for different audiences – members, officers and the public – to try and improve transparency and accountability.
- It was suggested that a version of the map and framework be developed specific to different governance models and tiers of local government.
- The importance of the wider body of members in a council taking ownership of governance and properly scrutinising their Annual Governance Statement was emphasised.
- Alternative definitions of reassurance and assurance were put forward – reassurance being when someone tells you that something is OK and assurance being when someone demonstrates to you that it is OK. A council with a culture of strong governance would have a good balance of these two aspects. It was suggested that the definitions of principals and their agents in paragraph 10d needed revisiting.
- The balance between organisations looking at assurance/reassurance and innovation was considered important.
- In the diagram, it was suggested that the Local Government Ombudsman may sit better in the 'Central

Guidance/Codes/Regulations' box.

- It was suggested that individual Cabinet Members in a council should have direct oversight of the effectiveness of governance arrangements within their directorate, feeding into the wider council review of annual governance arrangements.

HW reassured members that, as suggested, the work being undertaken would be used to inform support materials for councillors and councils to help them in their assurance and oversight role around governance.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board:

- 1) **Noted** the report and **agreed** that their feedback be incorporated into the work programme and next steps.
- 2) **Agreed** to delegate to Lead Members the approval of the LGA's response to the Government's consultation on statutory guidance for local authorities on the Best Value duty.

6 Transformation Support Programme

The Chair invited Susan Attard (SA), Head of Productivity, to introduce the report.

SA reported that the new Transformation Support Programme was being developed as part of the funding agreement for 2023/24 with DLUHC, with a focus on providing support for councils to transform, improve and change. It was being developed with the sector through the LGA's existing Transformation Network and early feedback had been very positive. Officers were working with the LGA's regional teams to identify councils that might benefit most from the Programme. SA ran through the 8 improvement support offers that made up the programme and explained that these would be delivered with Local Partnerships. They were being grouped into three broad themes – (i) peer support; (ii) learning and skills; and (iii) tools and resources. Feedback was sought from members on how the Programme could be further tailored to meet the needs of councils.

Members' comments and questions:

- The programme was warmly welcomed by the Board and it was considered to be a huge opportunity for councils to modernise and transform the way they work.
- It was suggested that there could be a greater role for elected members, both in terms of utilising their experience and expertise in this area and in helping reach out to councils who needed more support.
- The importance of political leadership and support from the LGA were both cited as critical factors in instigating transformation programmes in councils.
- The proposed matching service was welcomed in relation to helping councils that were not so advanced on their transformation journeys.

- Two key areas of future opportunity for local government transformation were identified as artificial intelligence and harnessing the power of individuals working in communities.

SA thanked members for their input and added three additional points on member involvement – (i) in relation to the capability framework, it was proposed that the LGA develop a series of questions for members to ask their officers on transformation in their councils; (ii) Feedback would be sought from members and officers on how the TIEx tool had worked and how it could be updated and improved to support councils in their transformation journeys; (iii) the transformation masterclasses would involve both officers and members.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** the overview of the new Transformation Support Programme and **agreed** that the feedback provided be taken into account to inform future planning and delivery of the programme.

7 Peer Support Review update

The Chair invited Gary Hughes (GH), Principal Adviser – National Peer Challenge Programme, and Helen Jenkins (HJ), Head of Leadership, to introduce the update.

GH provided members with an update on progress with actions agreed as part of the review of Peer Support. GH highlighted the following areas:

- Recruitment and retention of an experienced, skilled and diverse range of peers was progressing well and officers were confident that the requirements of the Corporate and Finance Peer Challenge programme could be met.
- Robust quality assurance procedures were now in place.
- Work around a technical solution to updating member peer profiles should be complete by September 2023.
- A new peer challenge training programme was being developed centred around (i) virtual peer briefings; (ii) face to face training sessions – a rolling programme based on need; (iii) a regional training programme. In addition, a pilot peer challenge shadowing process was being set up.

HJ updated members on the peer mentoring training programme. The first session took place in May 2023 with further dates scheduled at quarterly intervals during the year. The mentoring handbook was currently being refreshed with the aim of publishing in Autumn 2023.

Members' comments and questions:

- How were the principles of robustness, sensitivity, proportionality and consistency being implemented in the peer performance appraisal process? GH said that the possible role of accreditation and assessment would be considered in partnership with the national and regional peers, once the current training programme had bedded in. GH pointed out that there would be an additional

- cost to implementing accreditation.
- Clarification was sought on the process for peers receiving training. GH explained that officers were working with the political group offices and regional lead peers to identify those peers who could most benefit from training, and these names would be put forward very soon. Places would be offered on a mixture of virtual and face to face sessions.
 - The importance of existing informal support networks for peers, in conjunction with the proposed formal training, was also strongly emphasised.
 - It was suggested that making greater use of remote training sessions could help to reduce the training backlog more quickly.

The Chair thanked members for their input and emphasised the importance of strong cross-party support in taking forward the review at pace.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** progress in implementing actions arising from the peer support review.

8 Cross-Improvement Communications Strategy: Q1 update

The Chair invited Nicky Old (NO), Director of Communications, to introduce the update.

NO updated members on progress since the previous report to IIB in February 2023 and noted that across the first quarter (April-June 2023), there was evidence to show that there had been a positive step change in terms of effective communications activity and support. NO reported that the communication improvement team was currently working on possible alternative ways of funding their support offer to councils in the light of the decision by DLUHC to no longer include this work as part of the overall improvement grant. There was likely to be competition from commercial organisations for this work and so communication with the sector about an LGA offer would commence very soon.

Members' comments and questions:

- In response to a question about plans for the LGA to use Instagram as a communication platform, NO confirmed that officers were looking at how it could be best used, making more use of visual messaging, and also how this could be sustained over a longer period.
- Concern was expressed that if the LGA brought in charges to access communications support, this could effectively exclude the more financially challenged councils. NO said that the LGA could still offer these councils some limited initial ad hoc support free of charge but longer-term support, which the DLUHC grant previously funded, would need to be looked at on a case by case basis.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** progress during Q1 of 2023/24

across a number of communications, marketing and events activity linked to the LGA's sector support offer, and the impact of its programmes.

9 Innovation Zone and Wider Conference 2023 Wrap-up

The Chair invited Katharine Goodger (KG), Improvement Coordination and Strategy Adviser, to introduce the report.

KG thanked members for their support in delivering the IZ as part of the wider LGA Conference and Exhibition, in particular, Lead Members and those members who took part in the working group. Informal feedback so far had been overwhelmingly positive with many delegates commenting on the strength of the programme. Formal feedback, through an online survey, would be collated and presented to members in due course. Some delegates felt that, given the popularity of the events in the IZ, the space allocated should have been larger in order to accommodate greater numbers of participants. Planning for Harrogate 2024 would begin shortly and so feedback from members was sought.

Members' comments and questions:

- Members felt that overall, the IZ had been excellent this year and thanked officers for their efforts in pulling it all together.
- A slightly longer gap between sessions was requested in order to give more time for turnover and attending subsequent sessions. KG confirmed that they would be looking at this for next year but there was a balance to be struck with getting as many sessions into the programme as possible.
- Members felt that the prominent location of the IZ was excellent in terms of attracting interest and this needed to be taken into account when deciding whether or not to move to a larger space.
- It was suggested that the LGA look into using venues other than Bournemouth and Harrogate as the IZ assumed greater importance in the overall Conference programme. NO confirmed that the LGA was tied into Harrogate (2024), Liverpool (2025) and Bournemouth (2026) but in the next few months officers would be starting to look for venues for 2027 and beyond. She confirmed that officers would be looking at options for the set up for Harrogate in 2024 and this would include the role and position of the IZ in the wider Conference programme.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** the report.

10 Any other business

There was no further business.

Appendix A -Attendance

Position/Role	Councillor	Authority
Chair	Cllr Abi Brown	Stoke-on-Trent City Council
Vice-Chair	Cllr Liz Green	Kingston upon Thames Royal Borough Council
Deputy-Chair	Cllr Neil Prior	Pembrokeshire County Council
Members	Cllr Nigel Ashton	North Somerset Council
	Cllr Phil Twiss	Devon County Council
	Cllr Phil North	Test Valley Borough Council
	Cllr Philip Broadhead	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Council
	Cllr Derek Bastiman	North Yorkshire Council
	Cllr Jane Mudd	Newport City Council
	Cllr Dr Beccy Cooper	Worthing Borough Council
	Cllr Victoria Cusworth	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
	Cllr Vince Maple	Medway Council
	Cllr Anthony McKeown	High Peak Borough Council
	Mayor Peter Taylor	Watford Borough Council
	Cllr Alex Coley	Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
	Mike Haines	LGA Independent Group
	Mr Richard Priestman	Independent Observer
	Mr Philip Sellwood CBE	Independent Observer
	Cllr Gwilym Butler (sub)	Shropshire Council
Apologies	Cllr Laura Beddow	Dorset Council
	Cllr Brigid Jones	Birmingham City Council
	Mayor Damien Egan	Lewisham London Borough Council
	Cllr Alan Connett	Teignbridge District Council
In Attendance	Cllr James Hakewill	North Northamptonshire Council
	Cllr Paul Hilliard	Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Council
	Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
	Cllr Mike Every	Cotswold District Council