

Minutes of last Improvement & Innovation Board meeting

Improvement & Innovation Board

Friday, 15 December 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 Chairman welcomed members to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Cllr Grace Williams, Cllr Jane Gebbie, Cllr Alan Connett and Mayor Damien Egan. Cllr Deidre Costigan acted as substitute for Cllr Williams.

Cllr Tim Pickstone declared an interest in any matters related to the Be a Councillor and Next Generation projects as his employer is contracted to deliver parts of these programmes.

2	Minutes and actions from the previous meeting
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The minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

3	DLUHC Sector Support Programme negotiations 2023/24
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Members received a confidential update on Sector Support Programme negotiations.

4	Strengthening and promoting our Peer Challenge Offer
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The Chairman invited Gary Hughes (GH), National Programme Manager (Peer Challenge), to introduce the report.

GH said that the report before members was a result of the request at the previous Board meeting for officers to look at options to strengthen the LGA's approach to delivering Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). This was in the light of a significantly changed policy environment with the emergence of Oflog and an increasing number of councils facing serious financial challenges. This changing environment had led to considerable debate in the trade press and within government about the effectiveness

of Sector-Led Improvement (SLI) and CPC in particular. GH set out these criticisms in detail and then presented a series of proposals to address them along the following 5 themes:

Members' comments and questions were sought on the 5 areas in turn:

1) Improve rigour of CPC

- It was suggested that the progress review process was currently too variable and needed to be more closely prescribed.
- The perception of 'chuminess' needed to be addressed and, in this regard, it was considered important that the LGA always selected the peer team, not the council itself and that both the Chief Executive and Leader be part of the scoping meeting.
- Scoping was considered to be very important and being realistic both with the council and in discussions with government about what CPC can and can't achieve.
- Peers need to be able to ask robust questions of councils and failure to comply properly with requests should be reflected in the final report.
- The stronger focus on data and evidence was welcomed but it was also considered important not to lose the qualitative element of a review, which often gives the best insights into the culture of a council.

2) Encouraging uptake of CPC

- In relation to the letter from the LGA Chair, it was considered important to maintain political group sovereignty and an initial letter from the relevant group leader might be more appropriate and effective.
- Regional and national lead peers also had an important role to play in encouraging take up of CPC.
- The question of mandation of CPC was discussed. It was suggested that, as the LGA couldn't force its members to have one, Oflog had a role to play in making this happen.
- It was not considered realistic or fair to make being a member peer contingent upon their councils having undertaken a recent CPC.
- Clarification was sought on the process for reminding councils that they are due a CPC. GH explained that this was currently largely through the LGA's Principal Advisers and national/regional peers speaking to the councils in question. In addition, Officers have this year started to send out formal letters from group leaders. This process would be formalised and tightened up for future years with the aim of delivering a rolling program of 5 yearly CPCs in all councils.
- The capacity of the LGA to deliver CPCs to councils every 5 years was queried. GH confirmed that he was confident that enough peers had been recruited to deliver the LGA's targets.

- 3) Improve preparedness for delivering 'high-risk' CPCs and provide enhanced insight to councils facing significant challenge:
 - The proposals were welcomed but future conversations would be required around the breadth of work required of peers and whether encouraging specialisms was desirable.
 - Clarification was sought on what constituted 'high risk'. GH confirmed that high risk councils were monitored through the Performance Support Panel. Regional teams make use of both quantitative and qualitative data to determine whether councils need support.
- 4) Ensuring the best people are in place
 - The Peer Support Review had resulted in significant improvements in selection and training for member peers but the proposed accreditation process for officer peers was considered equally important. GH said that this would be a strong focus of work for 2024.
 - The proposed 'crib sheet' to provide peers with the knowledge to become 'SLI ambassadors' was welcomed.
 - In response to a question about joint member/officer training, GH agreed that it would be a good idea to introduce this.
- 5) Improve the robustness, consistency and impact of CPC and Progress Review reports
 - The importance of formalising and standardising the follow up review process, as well as building in an appropriate level of rigour, was highlighted. However, some flexibility was needed in order to be able to react to changing circumstances within a council, such as change in political leadership.

The Chairman summed up the discussion by warmly welcoming the report as a big step forward and reiterated that the Board was happy for all the specific proposals to be implemented, alongside a dedicated communication strategy, in the new year.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **endorsed** all the proposed options in Appendix 4A and agreed that officers should develop a fully costed project plan, including all resource implications, and a fully developed communication and engagement plan.

5 LG Inform update

The Chairman invited Cllr Alex Coley, Lead Member for data and digital, and Alex Rigge (AR), Programme Manager LG Inform, to introduce the report.

Cllr Coley reported that he had met with officers to discuss potential improvements to LG Inform following the discussion at the previous Board meeting where concerns had been raised, in particular about awareness

raising and marketing. In particular, it was recommended that an App be developed to make LG Inform more accessible and to enable greater customisation for users.

AR expanded upon some of the issues identified by members at the previous meeting and plans for the future. In particular:

- It was proposed to develop a specification for an LG Inform App between now and 1 April 2024 and subsequently to go out to tender.
- A series of short how to use videos would be created with additional promotion, help and support material.
- Relaunching the LG Inform user group in January 2024.

Members' comments and questions:

- Members discussed the pros and cons of procuring an LG Inform App. AR reassured members that a careful review of the value, and identification of the key audiences for an App would be undertaken before taking a final decision on whether to go ahead with the procurement. Juliet Whitworth, Head of Research and Information, confirmed that the original cost estimate was from work undertaken in 2020 and the cost now would likely be lower given the increasing competition in the market.
- In response to a question about the commercial opportunities for LG Inform, AR confirmed that there were already commercial clients for LG Inform Plus and the product was unique in the marketplace, so further potential existed.

Decision

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

6 Office for Local Government (Oflog) update

The Chairman invited Juliet Whitworth (JW), Head of Research and Information, to introduce the update.

JW provided members with an update on developments with Oflog since the previous Board meeting in October, as set out in the report. In particular, members were asked to agree to delegate to the Lead Members sign off of the LGA's response to the inquiry by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee into Oflog. This was due to the tight timescale for providing evidence.

Members' comments and questions:

- Concern was expressed about the real risk of Oflog potentially replacing the LGA's activity in some areas, particularly in relation to the 'early warning conversation' visits to councils. It was suggested that meetings with shadow ministers would be helpful in order to gauge their thinking on Oflog ahead of a general election.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board noted the update and agreed to delegate to Lead Members approval of the LGA's response to the inquiry by the

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee into Oflog.

7 Peer Support Review update

The Chairman invited GH to introduce the update.

GH highlighted the considerable progress made against the action plan agreed as part of the Peer Support Review. Officers were now proposing that IIB formally sign off the review and that outstanding actions be included in the ongoing workstreams around strengthening CPC; better joining up working between Improvement and the Political Group Offices; and renewing the approach to peer training. GH highlighted that an automated process for updating peer profiles would be trialed in the new year. The peer profiles themselves would also be revamped and input sought from members.

Members' comments and questions:

- In response to a question about the training section of peer profiles, GH confirmed that it was not just limited to LGA training.
- Members discussed the benefits of having more than one member peer, from a different political party, on a CPC. It was agreed that this should be encouraged, and added to the list of proposals agreed in item 4 on strengthening CPC.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board:

- 1) **Noted** the significant improvement actions achieved as a result of the peer support review.
- 2) **Agreed** to formally close the peer support review and that outstanding actions and wider identified work be included in priority workstreams around Corporate Peer Challenge, peer training and development of an Improvement Protocol.

Action:

Add an ambition to have more than one member peer on CPCs to the list of agreed proposals in relation to improving the rigour of CPC at agenda item 4 – GH.

8 Improvement update

The Chairman invited Mia Shelton (MS), Senior Adviser – Improvement Coordination & Strategy, to introduce the update.

MS advised members that the full Q3 outturn would be available at the next Board in February and a full report, including on potential risks to delivery, would be tabled at this meeting. MS advised the Board that Lead Members had signed off on the next stage of the Assurance Framework consultation going live. A series of roundtable events, chaired by Cllr Brown, had been held to gather learning from councils that had had to issue S.114 notices or capitalisation directives. The findings would be captured as part of an article in First magazine. The national member peer

conference had taken place and had been very successful.

Members' comments and questions:

- Further information was requested on numbers of non-corporate peer challenges carried out. Officers agreed to provide this information to members.
- Clarification was requested on the relative numbers of CPCs and governance and finance peer challenges. GH confirmed that most councils were interested in doing full CPCs but DLUHC had asked for separate governance and finance targets to be included in the programme.

Decision:

Improvement & Innovation Board **noted** the update on the programmes outlined in the paper.

Action:

Provide information on numbers of service specific non CPCs carried out – MS

9 Any other business

Innovation Zone – Selena McGuinness, Graduate Trainee, Improvement Coordination and Strategy, highlighted that the application process for Innovation Zone bids was opening on 18 December, remaining open until the end of February. Expressions of interest from IIB members to take part in the member working group were also invited.

Board Terms of Reference – DS reported that the Board's Terms of Reference had been amended to reflect comments from members at the previous meeting. Cllr Derek Bastiman had now been appointed as the Board's Equalities Advocate through the political group process.

Member Peer Conference – GH presented members with some feedback from the recent Member Peer Conference.

DS put on record his thanks to Katie Goodger who was taking up a secondment within the South East regional team.

Action Log

Action	Owner	Deadline	Status
Add an ambition to have more than one member peer on CPCs to the list of agreed proposals in relation to improving the rigour of CPC at agenda item 4	GH	21/2/24	Complete
Provide information on numbers of service specific non CPCs carried out	MS	21/2/24	Complete

Appendix A -Attendance

Position/Role	Councillor	Authority
Chairman	Cllr Abi Brown	Stoke-on-Trent City Council
Vice-Chair	Cllr Tim Pickstone	Cumberland Council
Deputy-Chair	Cllr David Baines	St Helens Borough Council
Deputy-Chair	Cllr Alex Coley	Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
Members	Cllr Jane Mudd	Newport City Council
	Cllr Dr Beccy Cooper	Worthing Borough Council
	Cllr Anthony McKeown	High Peak Borough Council
	Cllr Jane Scullion	Calderdale Council
	Cllr Rory Love OBE	Kent County Council
	Cllr Derek Bastiman	North Yorkshire Council
	Cllr Phil North	Test Valley Borough Council
	Cllr Gwilym Butler	Shropshire Council
	Cllr David Thomas	Torbay Council
	Mayor Peter Taylor	Watford Borough Council
	Cllr Mike Every	Cotswold District Council
	Cllr Sarah Rouse	Malvern Hills District Council
	Cllr William Nunn	Breckland Council
	Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
	Mr Richard Priestman	Independent Observer
	Mr Philip Sellwood CBE	Independent Observer
	Cllr Deidre Costigan (sub)	Ealing London Borough Council
Apologies	Cllr Grace Williams	Waltham Forest London Borough Council
	Mayor Damien Egan	Lewisham London Borough Council
	Cllr Alan Connett	Teignbridge District Council
	Cllr Jane Gebbie	Bridgend County Borough Council