

Priorities and Work Programme for 2015/16

Purpose of report

For discussion and agreement.

Summary

This report provides an update on the LGA's support to improvement in the sector. It sets the work in the context of the LGA's current Business Plan priorities and the Leadership Board's policy commissions, provides an update on the recent consultation on the future of sector-led improvement and the current position on funding support for 2016/17 and invites the Board to reflect on its priorities for the coming year.

Recommendation

That the Board:

- a) notes the steps being taken to improve our approach to sector led improvement and in particular peer challenge (paragraph 14);
- b) agrees that officers should draw together a programme of action to develop our peer pool;
- c) discusses and agrees the broad priorities for the Board's work programme for 2015/16 and decides on whether to allocate lead members and provide opportunities for other members to get more involved in specific priority areas.

Action

Officers to progress the Board's agreed priorities, reporting regularly to the Board. Subject to agreement of the priorities, officers to invite members to express preferences about those they would like to be more involved with.

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Priorities and Work Programme for 2015/16

Background

1. The LGA's Boards seek to lead the agenda for local government on the key challenges and issues within their remit, and support the overall objectives of the organisation, as set out in the LGA's Business Plan.
2. The Boards take an active role in helping to shape the Association's business plan through extensive engagement with councils and oversight of the programmes of work that deliver these strategic priorities.
3. The business plan and Boards' work programmes are underpinned by the LGA budget, which allocates resources to enable the Association to deliver the priorities in the business plan. It is important that each Board's work programme is focused on a defined set of priorities on which they can deliver significant impact and demonstrate value to councils.
4. The Improvement and Innovation Board oversees a large part of the work of the LGA funded by revenue support grant. The work is also subject to a detailed Memorandum of Understanding for 2015/16 with government which sets out what the funding can and cannot be used for and includes a detailed list of outcomes and outputs. The IDeA Board has overall formal responsibility for all the work funded by revenue support grant.

Priorities for local government - the LGA's Business Plan for 2015/16

5. The LGA's Business Plan for 2015/16 sets out priorities for the organisation, which are based on those issues that that matter most to our membership. For 2015/16 the four top priorities for local government are:
 - 5.1 **Funding for local government** – the finance system is reformed so councils have confidence their financing is sustainable and fair, opportunities to raise more funds locally, and greater ability to promote collective working across local public services.
 - 5.2 **Devolution** - there is a radical re-think of governance and accountability to achieve a real shift in power to local people.
 - 5.3 **Economic growth, jobs and housing** – councils are recognised as central to revitalising local economies.
 - 5.4 **Sector-led improvement** – councils are responsible for their own performance, effectiveness and efficiency, accountable before all else to their local communities.

At the time of writing this report the LGA's Business Plan for 2015/16 was in the process of being updated and subject to member approval an additional priority of **Promoting Health and Well Being** was being added to the four above.

Sector-led Improvement

6. Sector-led improvement is the approach to improvement developed and put in place by councils and the LGA (led by the Improvement and Innovation Board) alongside the

successful lobbying for the abolition of much of the old performance framework of inspection and upward reporting to Government.

7. Our belief in sector-led improvement has shaped the core services the LGA offers to councils - supporting local government as the most efficient and accountable part of the public sector and playing a leading role in improvement and innovation so that councils can continue to make a difference in their local areas and to the lives of their residents.
8. At the heart of the approach to sector-led improvement is a set of core principles that have been developed with and re-affirmed by the sector. They are that:
 - 8.1 Councils are responsible for their own performance and improvement and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for local people in their area.
 - 8.2 Councils are primarily accountable to local communities (not Government or the inspectorates), and stronger accountability, through increased transparency, helps local people drive further improvement.
 - 8.3 Councils have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole (evidenced by sharing best practice, offering member and officer peers, etc).
 - 8.4 The role of the LGA is to maintain an overview of the performance of the sector in order to identify potential performance challenges and opportunities – and to provide the tools and support to help councils take advantage of this approach.
9. The approach has been a success. There has been a strong take up of the support offer by councils. In addition, our wide-ranging evaluation published last year demonstrated that:
 - 9.1 residents remain satisfied with and continue to trust their local council, despite the increasing financial constraints being faced by the sector
 - 9.2 councils' performance across a wide range of metrics continues to improve
 - 9.3 the approach and offer of support from the LGA is welcomed and valued by councils.
10. However, national stakeholders have commented that the approach can lack transparency (they point for example to the fact that there is no requirement to publish peer challenge reports) and that the voluntary nature of the approach means that there is the possibility that not all councils receive the support they need.
11. Early this year therefore the Board decided to review the approach with the sector and issued a consultation paper "Taking stock: where next with sector-led improvement?"
http://www.local.gov.uk/publications/-/journal_content/56/10180/6918357/PUBLICATION
12. We received a healthy response to the consultation from the sector and national stakeholders. Key messages were:

- 12.1 The principles on which sector-led improvement is based are still the right ones but there could be a stronger emphasis on councils' leadership of place and partnership working.
 - 12.2 The mood of the sector has changed with respondents agreeing that there should be a stronger expectation on all authorities to have a corporate peer challenge on a regular basis, to publish reports and to produce action plans. These views were mirrored by responses to similar questions in the most recent LGA Perceptions Survey. Additionally, 61% of respondents agreed that "The LGA should be more challenging with authorities about their performance".
 - 12.3 Whilst happy with the current support offer, the most common developments suggested by respondents were around: the importance of sharing innovation, notable practice and learning across the sector; the importance of ensuring high quality peers; and drawing out collective lessons from peer challenges.
13. Following the consultation, the Improvement and Innovation Board agreed that discussions should take place with the new DCLG Ministerial team to understand their perspectives on sector led improvement. Ministers are strongly supportive of the approach and the role of the LGA, particularly in respect of the peer challenge work. They have views very much in line with what the vast majority of councils said in response to the consultation. They would welcome all councils having a peer challenge and publishing all such reports and producing appropriate improvement or action plans which can only improve local accountability.
14. Officers have taken the findings of the consultation on sector led improvement and initiated a number of changes. These have included:
- 14.1. Refreshing the core components to put more focus on place
 - 14.2. Making the follow up visit a standard part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process
 - 14.3. Revising the feedback format to make it more formal and consistent
 - 14.4. Clearer expectations for councils to publish reports and the action plan
 - 14.5. Greater emphasis on financial sustainability informed by an improved approach to providing financial briefing information to Corporate Peer Challenge teams
 - 14.6. Planning on the basis that all local authorities should have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Challenge over a 4/5 year period.
15. The Peer Challenge work relies on good quality peers if it is to be successful and feedback to date on the quality of peers, both members and officers, continues to be very high. The next section of the report looks at the current processes for peer recruitment, deployment and development and in light of the findings from the SLI consultation proposes some suggestions to further improve and develop the quality of our peers.

Peer Management: recruitment, development and deployment

16. Since 2011/12 and the introduction of SLI we have adopted an approach to peer recruitment that is considerably more cost effective, proportionate, risk based and built more on shared responsibility with the sector.

17. We currently manage and co-ordinate the deployment of more than 500 officer and member peers each year who deliver 3,500 - 4,000 days of support to the sector through peer challenges, mentoring and other peer-led activity. The majority of these peer days are delivered through our corporate, fire, children's, adults and health peer challenge programmes. Feedback from the sector confirms we are continuing to deploy high quality peers with relevant experience and expertise.

Peer recruitment

18. The Political Group Offices (PGOs) are responsible for the recruitment of member peers, and the Local Government Support (LGS) Team oversee the recruitment of officer peers. There is regular liaison between the respective teams about future peer requirements, e.g. LGS Programme Managers provide PGOs with anticipated numbers of peer challenges each year and a Forward Plan listing all peer challenges scheduled or in discussion is shared on a weekly basis to inform recruitment (and deployment) considerations.

Officer peers

19. LGS Programme Managers are responsible for ensuring there is appropriate peer capacity to meet the needs of their respective peer challenge programmes. Recruitment of peers occurs through a variety of channels, including:
- 19.1. Call for peers on the website: the peer challenge webpages set out details of how officers and members can put themselves forward as peers. There is information about being a peer and materials that promoted the value of being a peer.
 - 19.2. Recommendations and referrals: Principal Advisers, policy staff and existing peers regularly suggest names of officers who they think would make good peers and LGS Programme Managers or Peer Placement Officers follow up accordingly to check interest and suitability.
 - 19.3. Peer Challenge scoping meetings: we take the opportunity at scoping meetings to ask the council to consider putting forward their best officers as peers. Most councils appreciate they are taking from the peer pool when receiving a peer challenge and are happy to encourage their officers to be considered as peers.
 - 19.4. Talent spotting during peer challenges: we are always on the look-out for new officer peers, and often there are senior officers we engage with during peer challenges that either express an interest in participating in the programme as a peer, or display the attributes of good peers.
 - 19.5. Targeted promotional activities: Recruitment is driven by programme demands and requirements. Each programme will at some point do some targeted recruitment activity which could include sessions at relevant regional network events, articles and features in the media (e.g. Guardian and **First**), or liaison with relevant professional bodies and associations such as CFA, ADCS, etc.
20. All officers putting themselves forward as a peer are asked to complete an Expression of Interest Form or provide a CV. Officer Peers are asked to confirm they have the endorsement of their employing Authority and also a reference on request.

Member Peers

21. Each of the Political Groups have their own processes for the recruitment of member peers though there are a number of common elements. In each case it is usually a combination of the Political Group Office and the national and/or regional member peers that play a key role in the recruitment of new peers. Reviews of the peer pool are undertaken often following the May elections to ensure that any gaps are filled.
22. If there is a subject area that is going to be in demand the political groups will look to recruit members to fit the bill. They will often encourage existing peers to suggest suitable names to apply to become peers too.
23. In some cases the relevant political improvement board has oversight over who is and isn't accredited.
24. In some groups they have allocated one of their regional peers (or national peer) a lead responsibility for identifying and recruiting new peers.
25. All of the groups ensure that peers understand that accreditation does not guarantee work.
26. The Independent group are currently refreshing their peer pool as they only have a small pool of active accredited peers.

Peer training and development

Officer peers

27. For officer peers, our emphasis has shifted from assessment against a generic set of competencies to programme specific training and guidance. As a result there are bespoke peer training/briefing events for each of the peer challenge programmes (corporate, children's, adults, health, etc). The format for each varies but all focus on raising the understanding and awareness of the specific offer and the role of the peer in delivering that, including the generic peer challenge principles and ground rules. Attendance at events is strongly encouraged, and for some programmes such as Children's is considered mandatory before someone can be deployed as a peer.

Member peers

28. Training and development of peers across the political groups is a bit more variable. Two of the party groups hold induction and training events for new and existing peers each May/June and in some cases new peers are mentored during their first project.

Peer deployment

29. The Peer Database has approximately 1,500 officers and 330 members on the database. This is essentially the 'peer pool'. The pool serves all of the various peer challenge and support programmes and peers are tagged with primary programme suitability and key service/specialisms which aids peer searches. This also enables LGS Programme Managers

and Peer Placement Officers to monitor the peer capacity available for each peer challenge programme. Maintaining the currency and quality of peer data is a key challenge.

30. Requests for peers (both officers and members) are co-ordinated by LGA Peer Placement Officers. They work closely with Programme Managers to source officer peers and forward member peer requests to the relevant PGO who determine the member peers to be approached. Relevant peers who are identified as available and interested are put forward to the client council for their consideration. In each case we seek to provide the council with a shortlist of potential officer and member peers to choose from. However, in some cases because of the specific expertise required or lack of availability, it can mean that the choice is limited.

Developing our current approach and practice

31. While the current model has continued to enable the deployment of good quality and effective peers, there is more we can do to strengthen our approach. For example:
- 31.1. Member Peer Conference: reinstating the annual conference that we used to hold for all member peers. This will provide an opportunity to run workshop sessions on the various peer-led offers, as well as the general induction activity for new member peers. It could also be an opportunity to engage peers about the further and future development of our offers.
 - 31.2. Providing more training for peers as mentors.
 - 31.3. Putting in place a more consistent process for obtaining formal feedback to improve the peer's own performance and to potentially flag up any training needs we need to provide.
 - 31.4. Developing a more comprehensive and stand-alone peer induction pack that can be issued to all new peers (officers and members). This could provide a succinct summary of the various peer-led support offers as well as the basic induction information.
 - 31.5. Developing guidance for the whole range of peer activity. Currently guidance for peer challenges is comprehensive, but for other peer-led offers such as mentoring there may be benefit in producing a new guide and toolkit – something several member peers have requested recently. This might reinforce the responsibility/requirement for peers to regularly feedback on activity that they are delivering.
 - 31.6. More joint officer and member development sessions. All of the peer challenge focussed training events are designed to accommodate member peers too and we could do more to target and encourage relevant members to participate in these.
 - 31.7. More joint and detailed planning by LGS and PGO staff regarding future peer capacity required to deliver the peer-led support likely to be demanded by the sector (perhaps via a quarterly planning meeting).
32. If the Board agree that we should continue to take steps to enhance our peer offer then officers will draw together a programme of action to develop our peer pool.

Work commissioned by the LGA Leadership Board

33. As part of the recent member-led review of governance, the LGA Executive and Leadership Board have been asked to commission work from our policy Boards where a clear corporate priority has been identified or where an important policy issue straddles more than one Board.
34. The following cross-cutting areas of work were agreed and are being commissioned from relevant Boards in 2015-16. Specific Boards have been asked to lead this work as indicated below. Lead Boards are having detailed discussions about the projects at their first meetings of this Board cycle. All policy Boards are invited to consider their contributions to the following four projects:
- 34.1 **Devolution and future shape of local government** (jointly led by City Regions and People and Places). It is likely that this work will focus on supporting councils to develop and implement bespoke devolution deals, including: governance, the evidence base for devolution, and working with Whitehall once the Cities and Local Government Bill has been enacted.
- 34.2 **Housing** (led by the Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board), will include a focus on addressing housing need, building on the LGA's leadership of this debate.
- 34.3 **Finance** (led by the Resources Portfolio) will be driven largely by the outcome of the Spending Review and will look to build on our successful Future Funding Outlook work.
- 34.4 **Promoting health and wellbeing** (led by the Community Wellbeing Portfolio). Continued moves towards an integrated health and care system remains at the top of councils' and the Government's agenda, and getting these new arrangements right for councils and citizens remains a significant opportunity for the LGA.

Board current activity

35. Currently the Improvement and Innovation Board has organised its sector-led improvement activity under five broad strategic themes:
- 35.1 Improvement
 - 35.2 Productivity
 - 35.3 Innovation
 - 35.4 Leadership
 - 35.5 Transparency.
- The Board has also led the LGA's work on the future of local public audit and the creation of Public Service Audit Appointments to manage local audit contracts on the abolition of the Audit Commission.
36. At the last Board meeting, members received a report that provided a brief summary of

some of the key activities and outputs across the five strategic themes. Particularly for new members of the Board, this report is **attached as Appendix A**, as much of the activity is work that is currently due to continue.

Sector-led improvement communications campaign

37. The LGA Business Plan for 2015/16 identified a number of campaigns to help support the delivery of LGA priorities including:

*37.1 **Sector-led improvement** - highlighting the benefits of sector-led improvement to local government and to promote the good practice taking place across councils.*

38. Although we have done a lot to raise the profile of our work on sector-led improvement, the results of the sector-led improvement “Taking stock” consultation and the LGA Perceptions Survey demonstrate that there is a continuing need to promote the benefits of sector-led improvement to national stakeholders and to widen awareness of the approach (and some of the specific tools) in the sector, particularly amongst non-executive members.

Strategic oversight of LGA improvement activity

39. Although all LGA Boards have a contribution to make to supporting improvement, the Improvement and Innovation Board provides strategic oversight of this activity and works closely with other Boards. In order to give effect to this, the Board has previously agreed that:

39.1 officers be asked to coordinate the flow of business through the Boards so that the Improvement and Innovation Board is invited to express strategic views about any significant improvement issues before other Boards

39.2 during the year the Improvement and Innovation Board receives suitably timed progress reports on the major improvement programmes, for example:

- Children’s: around the Annual Ofsted report
- Corporate/Finance: around Budget time
- Adults/Health: around the annual Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care (TEASC) report of performance

and relevant Board Chairs be invited to attend

39.3 as far as possible, the Improvement and Innovation Board meets towards the end of each quarterly cycle of meetings so it can consider any significant issues put before other Boards and then report back to Boards at their next meeting.

40. There is a separate report on the agenda describing the improvement activity currently being led by LGA Boards.

Improvement support provided by the Centre for Public Scrutiny and Local Partnerships

41. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and Local Partnerships (LPs) both receive RSG top slice support from the LGA to fund activities to support councils. The LGA's relationship with both organisations is expressed in formal partnership agreements and as a result both organisations report annually to the LGA Leadership Board on their activities.
42. The most recent annual reports were submitted to the Leadership Board on 16 September 2015.
43. Cllr Tony Jackson sits as an LGA-nominated Trustee on the CfPS Board of Trustees, and the LGA has four member places on the CfPS Advisory Board nominated by the LGA political groups, and one officer place held by Dennis Skinner.

Board – Ways of Working

44. Currently the Board appoints a lead member or “portfolio holder” for each of the five priority areas. The “portfolio holders” have a variety of roles, all of which are an extension of the role of members of the Board. They might include: representing the Board at external and LGA events (speaking on behalf of the LGA and whole Board, not their political Group), engaging at a national level with key stakeholders, contributing to the planning and presentation of items within their portfolio to the Board, etc.
45. In addition, as a way of providing members with the opportunity to get more involved with the Board's work between meetings, the Board currently invites members to express preferences for areas/priorities they would like to be involved in. This allows the creation of a pool of interested councillors from varying political groups under each priority area. The nature of members' involvement depends on the pattern of work in each area.

Next Steps

46. Members are asked to discuss and agree the suggested broad priorities set out at para 35 and decide whether to allocate lead members to each of them. Progress will be reported regularly to the Board.

Appendix A

Improvement and Innovation Board: Review of the Year (2014/15)

Sector-led improvement

1. A significant focus of our work this year was to **review the approach to sector-led improvement** in the light of the wide-ranging evaluation and political thinking in the run up to the General Election. The review was initiated at a workshop for members of the Improvement and Innovation Board and representatives of other LGA Boards last year, following which we spent some time engaging sector representatives in the development of a consultation paper to local authorities. "Taking stock: where next with sector-led improvement?" was launched on 20 January 2015 with the consultation closing on 13 March 2015.
2. There was a strong response from the sector, with a total of 160 individual responses, covering 37 per cent of authorities. When responses from representative regional bodies were taken into account, 65 per cent of authorities were covered by the responses received. In addition, responses were received from a wide range of national stakeholders, professional bodies and regional local authority representative/improvement bodies. A response was also received from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. A full analysis of the responses was presented to our meeting in May 2015 and we are currently considering how to take the results forward in the context of a new Government.
3. The timing of the consultation coincided with the Leadership Board's decision that sector-led improvement should be one of the LGA's **campaigns** for 2014/15. This has led to: a revamp and greater prominence to the website content on sector-led improvement, the exploration of alternative ways of promoting the benefits of the LGA's support offer to councils, the development of some infographics and the use of social media leading to greater engagement. A short film/podcast was also produced and launched half way through the consultation period. The film captured a range of different views on some of the key issues in the consultation with a view to promoting debate and stimulating responses. The film was hosted on the LGA YouTube channel and on the LGA website.
4. Alongside the consultation, the results from the **LGA Perceptions survey** further demonstrated the sector's continuing support for the approach and the value attached to the support offer. More than three-fifths (63 per cent) of respondents agree that sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context. This is consistent with results in 2013. Overall, more than four in five respondents (83 per cent) think that the support provided by the LGA for sector-led improvement is useful, increasing to 89 per cent of Leaders and Chief Executives. Four fifths of respondents (80 per cent) believe that the support and resources offered by the LGA for sector-led improvement will have a positive impact on their own authority's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve – consistent with the 2013 figures.

Innovation

5. Once again this year a key element of LGA Innovation activity has been the **Innovation Zone** at the LGA's Annual Conference in 2015. Over 50 councils showcased their innovative approaches under the following themes: political leadership, commercialisation, digital, community action, integration and partnership working. We have also developed a searchable database of the innovative examples featured in the past two years' Innovation Zones. The database was launched in March 2015 as part of the new [LGA Innovative Councils](#) website, which signposts councils to all innovative work that the LGA is involved in.
6. In addition, in an exciting new partnership with the Design Council, the LGA has agreed to part fund "Better by Design" pilots in two regions - the South West and East of England. Each cohort will have 16 participants with six to eight councils selected to participate in each regional cohort clustered around particular geographic and cross sectorial issues. Delegates will be exposed to critical design leadership content and supported to identify design-led opportunities. This programme aims to equip councils with tools and confidence in this area.

Improvement

7. We continue to deliver a large number of **peer challenges** to the sector – 132 peer challenges in total in 2014/15 across a wide range of service areas, including 38 corporate peer challenges. By March 2015, councils had contributed more than 3,200 days of senior councillor and officer time to Corporate Peer Challenge teams representing a considerable investment by the sector in its own improvement, equivalent to millions of pounds of consultancy.
8. Working through the LGA's Lead Member Peers and Principal Advisers, we have provided **targeted support to individual councils** and groups of councils, for example: change of control support to 32 councils, bespoke peer mentoring support to 63 councils, follow-up support to 45 councils who received peer challenge and direct improvement support to 112 councils, eg around financial sustainability or where councils are facing specific improvement challenges.
9. **Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA)** has been successfully established by the LGA (though independent from it), and commenced business on 1 April 2015. It is a transitional body established to manage the current audit contracts with private sector audit firms carrying out external audits of a range of local NHS bodies, the police and local authorities. The contracts will run until at least 2017. We are currently consulting the sector on the desirability of extending the current contracts (thereby locking in estimated savings in the region of £24m a year in total) and the potential appetite for the establishment of a sector-led body that would procure external audit on authorities' behalf when the contracts expire.

Productivity

10. Through our productivity programme we have been supporting councils with pooling resources and redesigning services, identifying the key productivity gains for local government and making sure councils deliver these savings quickly. For example:
 - 10.1. We have captured and promoted good practice of councils **sharing services**. Our interactive web-based map includes examples from 416 shared service arrangements between councils resulting in £462 million of efficiency savings.
 - 10.2. We launched the **National Procurement Strategy** and initiated a programme of work to implement it, including instituting national category plans for high spending types of work.
 - 10.3. The joint LGA/Cabinet Office **One Public Estate programme** to help local and central government asset holders rationalize assets across central and local government is proving successful. To date the programme has seen the 32 local authorities involved save £129 million in capital receipts and £77 million in running costs, with further long term savings expected.
 - 10.4. Following the conclusion of the Adult Social Care Efficiency (ASCE) Programme with a final report and event last year, we have initiated a **Health and Social Care Integration programme** with a view to identifying the benefits of integrated working at local level.
 - 10.5. The **Productivity Expert programme** provides councils with expertise in a skills area of their choice in order to support them to deliver ambitious efficiency savings or income generation projects. Over three years, the programme has supported 54 councils across 36 projects and has contributed to £72 million in efficiency savings and income generation. The programme will support a further 20 projects this financial year.
 - 10.6. Our evaluation of the **Customer-Led Transformation programme**, which provided support to 63 projects, highlighted that the programme delivered over £331 million of financial benefit to the public and public services.

Supporting Political and Managerial Leadership

11. The LGA's refreshed leadership development support offer "Highlighting Leadership" has proved very popular - www.local.gov.uk/councillor-development. The offer provides: better targeting with clear, differentiated audiences, a more cohesive offer with new content and formats, and the flexibility to respond to changing local government agenda. Political leadership is at the heart of the refreshed offer and we have continued to support councillors through our highly acclaimed leadership programmes, with 577 councillors attending programmes in 2014/15.
12. During the year, we also introduced a number of additions to the offer including:
 - 12.1. **Tailored Community Leadership sessions at councils** run with LGA member peers and linked to the wider sector-led improvement offer on a variety of themes such as being an effective ward councillor, chairing skills, scrutiny, effective personal impact, effective meetings and licensing

- 12.2. Community Leadership **e-learning modules** with over 2400 people signed up to the e-learning portal and over 350 councils with access to the platform - currently available are e-modules on being an effective ward councillor, facilitation and conflict resolution, and handling complaints for service improvement
 - 12.3. **a Next Generation programme for Independent Group councillors**, sitting alongside the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat programmes, all of which aim to support and encourage ambitious and talented councillors in becoming bold political leaders
 - 12.4. **new modules** on commissioning, finance and digital leadership (for the Leadership Essentials programme) and effective opposition modules (for the Focus on Leadership programme).
13. The **National Graduate Development Programme** (ngdp) continues to be successful in attracting new talent into local government. The 2014 ngdp intake (Cohort 16) is coming to the end of their first year on the programme, with 110 graduates working in over 50 councils across England and Wales. Demand from councils to take part in the 2015 intake (Cohort 17) continues to be strong, with over 120 placement requests received from over 50 councils across England and Wales.

Transparency

14. We have continued to help councils get to grips with the implications of the Local Government Transparency Code and have published practical guidance to help authorities in implementing the Code. There were between 1600 and 2400 downloads for each of the various guidance documents during the first two months of publication. Based on our lobbying, local authorities received between £7,000 and £13,000 of new burdens funding from DCLG to pay for the ongoing cost of publications, depending on the type of authority.
15. We also secured £2.64 million between 2013 and 2015 in open data funding for authorities, via BIS' local open data Breakthrough Fund and the Cabinet Office Release of Data Fund, to help authorities release and use data in meaningful, practical ways to engage with local people and improve local services. Over 30 local authorities received grant funding to support the release and use of open data over the last two years.
16. **LG Inform**, our on-line data and benchmarking service, has increased its reach. It now has 97 per cent of councils registered and over 3,000 registered users. Since its launch, the public site has had over 93,000 visits from 53,000 unique visitors. We have continued to promote the new LG Inform to councils and to work with the sector to develop a free local benchmarking club. Now around 140 authorities are regularly taking part in this exercise, to collect and compare data that is not available elsewhere or is available quicker through LG Inform. Good progress has been made with **LG Inform Plus** (formerly known as esd-toolkit), our subscription package for local authorities offering a range of additional data tools and access to ward-level data. This met its income target for the year and brought in a small surplus.

Oversight of LGA Improvement activity

17. Members have agreed that it is important for the Improvement and Innovation Board to retain a strategic or “overarching” perspective on the improvement activity currently undertaken across LGA Boards. This will help ensure consistency with the key principles underpinning the approach to sector-led improvement and help avoid any potential duplication. We have received regular reports on the improvement activity of LGA Boards and had the opportunity, amongst others, to provide strategic input to the on-going work of the Planning Advisory Service and views on the development of the integrated Care and Health Improvement Programme for 2015/16.