

10 May 2016

Sector-led improvement evaluation: proposal for a research programme

Purpose

For discussion and approval.

Summary

This report advises members of the proposed second phase of evaluation of sector-led improvement and the LGA's support offer.

Action

To consider the proposed activity as outlined in the report and feedback any comments or suggestions to the Research and Information team.

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Sector-led improvement evaluation: proposal for a research programme

Background

1. The Local Government Association (LGA) developed the approach to sector-led improvement (SLI) in local government, to help councils strengthen their accountability and transform the way they evaluate and improve services. The original approach was set out in the LGA's document 'Taking the Lead' in February 2011, supplemented in June 2012 by 'Sector-led improvement in local government'¹.
2. Between 2012 and 2014, an evaluation of SLI and the LGA's offer was carried out, the full results of which can be found in the report, 'Evaluation of Sector-led Improvement' here: <http://tinyurl.com/i8oftl9>.
3. The evaluation was extensive and consisted of sixteen individual pieces of work that measured the perception of and support for SLI, including online surveys of directors and lead members, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, user surveys for YouChoose and Knowledge Hub, as well as evaluations of SLI support such as the Leadership Academy and Corporate Peer Challenges.
4. The overall message of the evaluation was positive:
 - 4.1. Residents remained satisfied with and continued to trust their local council, despite the increasing financial constraints being faced by the sector.
 - 4.2. An objective assessment of local government performance across the full range of local government activity demonstrated that councils were continuing to improve performance, with nearly three quarters of the performance metrics being monitored demonstrating improvement since 2010.
 - 4.3. Further, the SLI approach and offer of support from the LGA had been welcomed and valued by councils, and there was a high level of confidence within the sector in its capacity to monitor its own performance and improve.
5. Subsequent feedback through the regular LGA Perceptions surveys demonstrates that the sector still values the support offered by the LGA. In 2016, 85 per cent of respondents felt that the LGA's support for SLI was useful; this was even higher for directors (93 per cent), chief executives (90 per cent) and leaders (89 per cent).
6. Since publication of the evaluation in 2014, we have strengthened the approach to SLI in the light of the results of the wide ranging consultation with the sector last year.
7. In addition there is a strong expectation from DCLG that we will continue to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the approach. The draft Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) indicates that:

¹ http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=1895fbee-298e-439e-8ed1-0e9a8a8ddba5&groupId=10180

- 7.1. “We will continue to commission independent evaluation of our programmes of support and act on the findings. This will include seeking views from councils and government each year and reflecting those views in our annual programme of delivery. In particular, we will commission an independent quality assurance review to test programme delivery, implementation and a cost benefit analysis of our peer challenge programme”.
8. Accordingly we now propose to carry out a second phase of evaluation of SLI, to be carried out over the next four years. We propose that it is made up of two parts:
 - 8.1. overall evaluation of the progress of the SLI **approach** since phase one;
 - 8.2. evaluation of individual elements of the LGA’s support **offer** to the sector.

Objective of the evaluation

9. We propose that the evaluation runs over a four year period, with the main aim of helping us understand whether, in the context of reduced resources within the sector:
 - 9.1. the SLI approach has the continued confidence and engagement of the sector and the government and, as a result, the trust of the public;
 - 9.2. the LGA’s support has had a positive impact on the sector’s capacity to improve itself.
10. It will be important to ensure that the effect of reduced resources in the sector is considered for each element of this evaluation, so that the impact of SLI can be viewed within this context.
11. Whilst the proposed second wave of evaluation will need to be detailed enough to meet the MoU requirements, we do not propose to repeat all the work undertaken in the phase one evaluation. Instead we propose to streamline the process, focussing on the core elements of the LGA’s offer - leadership, peer challenge, productivity, LG Inform, etc. - and on their impact. We will also make use of other opportunities to gain feedback, such as the LGA Perceptions survey and our regular opinion polling.

Evaluation of the SLI approach and the LGA’s contribution

It is proposed that the objectives be explored using the following range of research and analysis.

12. **Ministers and senior officials.** As in 2012 and 2013, we propose to carry out a perceptions audit of ministers, senior officials and possibly shadow spokespeople, by commissioning in-depth interviews. This will be used to determine the current level of support and confidence in the sector’s ability to support its own improvement. This will also give us valuable feedback on the direction of the approach and stakeholder perceptions of its effectiveness.
13. **Local authorities.** We already conduct an annual LGA Perceptions Survey that collects useful information from chief executives, leaders, other senior politicians and officers as to their perceptions of SLI, the approach and the support offered by the LGA. We will continue with this survey, and propose to use the findings to look at trends in perceptions of SLI and the LGA support.

14. **Members of the public.** Assessing the impact of SLI on the public is difficult. This is partly because individuals vary in the extent to which they use and are aware of local government services, but also because individuals vary in their willingness to engage or participate in local decision-making and challenge. However, at the simplest level, it can be argued that SLI is successful if, despite the replacement of much of the top down inspection and performance management regime with SLI, public trust in local government remains the same or improves. The LGA has been conducting opinion polling of the public since 2012, in order to establish whether public trust in local government has been maintained or improved. This will continue to take place over the course of the evaluation.
15. **Performance Data.** Alongside the research to gather perceptions, over the course of the four years, we propose to also conduct several exercises to review a suite of performance data across a range of local government services. This will allow a more quantitative and arguably 'objective' assessment of the sector's performance, which can be considered alongside the opinion information.
16. **Evaluation of the LGA's SLI offer.** Some of the more significant resources offered by the LGA to support improvement and local accountability in the local government sector will need small separate evaluations. In most cases these have been built into the programmes themselves, and so we will work with them both to align the evaluation processes and bring together the results for this overall evaluation. Where elements do not currently have evaluations planned, we will work with the relevant programme managers to develop them in an efficient way.
 - 16.1. In each case, we will start by establishing a clear view of what would constitute the success of that element and how that would be measured, so as to evaluate the impact of each offer. As part of the annual LGA Perceptions Survey we already collect some useful baseline information about elements of the LGA offer, which will be included in the overall evaluation.
17. **Leadership support.** The programme team collects administrative data on the number of Leadership Academy places taken up and also feedback from attendees. We will also work with the programme team to carry out a full evaluation of the leadership offer and the Leadership Academy, allowing us to review the impact that the programme has within local authorities.
18. **Peer challenge and peer support.** The peer support programme team are currently capturing feedback from peer challenges as they are delivered. The team also plans to commission a full evaluation of the peer challenge programme to establish the impacts that peer challenges have had, as well as explore the reasons for authorities who have not made use of the offer. The results of this would feed directly into the overall evaluation.
 - 18.1. In addition, we currently capture some of the administrative data around the numbers of peer challenges and bespoke support, such as work with councils with recent political change. We also already have useful data on awareness about this offer and views about the services provided, as part of the annual LGA Perceptions Survey, both of which would also form part of the evaluation.

19. **LG Inform, data and transparency.** An online survey is planned for local authority users of LG Inform, which will allow an examination of how the tool is used for benchmarking, reporting, data sharing and exploration and transparency.
20. **Productivity.** We propose to evaluate the LGA's Productivity Programme's range of SLI projects to understand the direct and indirect impacts of those projects. We would also like to align the evaluation processes to facilitate an easier impact assessment; the results would be brought together for this overall evaluation.
21. **Other improvement support.** We plan also to review support we commission through other grant-funded bodies (e.g. the Centre for Public Scrutiny, and Local Partnerships) through a mix of bespoke data collection exercises and analysis of feedback already gathered by the relevant programmes.
22. **Timescales and deliverables.** The research and analysis will take place at various points over the next four years, depending on whether the data is already collected or scheduled to be collected (in which case we will use the existing timetable; for example the LGA Perceptions Survey is always scheduled to be in the Autumn). New data collections and analysis will be scheduled as appropriate, to reflect resources and milestones. The aim is to deliver the following outputs from this programme of work:
 - 22.1. a report for each element of the LGA offer, as described above (these will be published as and when completed between 2016 and 2020 – they will be detailed, and also be used to provide information to the programme managers to inform developments to their programme, but the key lessons from them will feed into the 'interim' and 'final' reports);
 - 22.2. an 'interim' report – summarising the key messages from research and analysis in the first two years, and including the key results from: the perceptions audit of ministers and senior officials, the results of the LGA's annual perceptions survey and public opinion polling, plus results of any LGA offer evaluations available at that time (available in 2018);
 - 22.3. a 'final' report – this will summarise the key messages from all the research and analysis that will have taken place between 2016 and 2020 (available in 2020).

Next steps

23. Members are asked to consider the proposed activity as outlined in the report and feedback any comments or suggestions to the Research and Information team.

Financial Implications

24. Research will either be conducted in house or using the resources allocated to improvement work; so no additional funding will be needed.