

An Independent Evaluation of Sector-Led Improvement in Local Government

Shared Intelligence

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Executive summary

In December 2019, [Shared Intelligence](#) (Si) was commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out an independent evaluation of sector-led improvement (SLI) in local government and to generate some reflections on the future of SLI. We have assessed an extensive evidence base created by the LGA which includes the association's membership surveys, surveys for individual SLI programmes and case study material. We also interviewed with 23 senior people from the local government sector including council leaders, chief executives and LGA officers and members and had several sessions with the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board.

The evidence shows that there is a very high level of awareness of SLI in local government with over 80 per cent of the respondents to the latest LGA membership survey saying that they have some knowledge of it. Similarly, almost 80 per cent of respondents either agree or strongly agree that SLI is the right approach in the current context. The level of satisfaction with the various SLI offers, at 70 per cent and over, is also remarkably high as it represents the proportion of people who think that the LGA should continue to provide this support.

In the context of very high levels of satisfaction overall, there is a degree of variation between types of respondent, councils, region and offer, including:

- Particularly positive feedback from council leaders and chief executives.
- An evolving picture in terms of support for and satisfaction with SLI on the part of other councillors and officers and officers and the different types of councillor.
- Particularly high levels of satisfaction with peer challenges and the provision of best practice.

Around 70 per cent of respondents to the LGA's latest perceptions survey reported that SLI has had a positive impact on their council to a great or significant extent. There is also extensive case study material available on the positive impact of SLI reported by individual councils.

We agreed four key research questions with the LGA.

1. DOES THE SLI APPROACH HAVE THE CONTINUED CONFIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT OF THE SECTOR?

Based on the evidence we have assessed there is no doubt that SLI has the continued support and engagement of the sector.

2. HAS THE LGA'S SUPPORT HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE SECTOR'S CAPACITY TO IMPROVE ITSELF?

It is reasonable to conclude from the evidence that is available that the LGA's support has strengthened the sector's capacity to improve itself. Further comprehensive impact data would help to answer this question even more directly.

3. WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SLI ON COUNCIL'S EFFECTIVENESS, IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION?

There is extensive and very positive evidence of the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation.

Based on our assessment of this evidence base we have identified several areas that require further exploration. They are:

- Some potentially important trends in levels of satisfaction with SLI and views on its usefulness among councillors.
- The most valued features of the SLI offer are peer challenge and support and political leadership development.
- Whether a longer-term agreement between the LGA and government could help to create the conditions for a longer-term approach to the collection of independent evidence of the impact of SLI.
- The scope for making even better use of the monitoring and evaluation material that is already produced as part of the SLI process to demonstrate its impact.

4. CAN THE IMPACT OF SLI BE ENHANCED GOING FORWARD AND, IF SO, HOW AND TO WHAT EXTENT?

Drawing on our review of the evidence and our qualitative research we identified six themes the LGA should explore in thinking about the future of SLI.

Ownership of SLI

The LGA should consider further ways in which the sector could directly influence the SLI offer. This could add value by:

- Helping to embed wider sector ownership of SLI;
- Maintaining an overview of the offer as a whole and individual elements, including those provided by other organisations such as the officer associations and societies;
- Helping to ensure that the offer meets the changing needs of councils;
- Contributing to a renewed drive to better communicate the importance of SLI, the support that is available, the learning from it and its impact.

The MoU between MHCLG and the LGA

There are concerns that the annual basis of the MoU between MCHLG and the LGA drives a short-term focus constraining both the impact of SLI and the sector's ability to evidence that impact.

Communication and profile

The LGA should consider whether being even more explicit about the independence of Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) teams and other people delivering SLI support, and communicating that fact, would help the association to fulfil both its representational and its improvement roles.

The LGA should consider whether, in the words of one of our interviewees, "SLI needs more oxygen within the LGA" to underpin a drive to communicate key messages about SLI within the sector and beyond.

The contribution of data and evidence

The LGA should consider whether the more systematic use of data would enhance SLI. This could include utilising comparative information to enable councils to assess themselves and where appropriate compare themselves with others.

Participation in SLI

LGA should consider what further action it could take to encourage increased participation in SLI activities.

SLI in councils in challenging circumstances

The LGA should explore whether when providing SLI support to councils in challenging circumstances there would be benefit in adopting a more assertive approach in relation to:

- The type of SLI intervention(s) that may be appropriate, the focus of those interventions and the selection of the team to deliver it;
- The make-up of the team and its ability to craft recommendations in a way that is most likely to lead to improvement;
- Publication of the findings and follow-up action and reporting.

Introduction

In December 2019, [Shared Intelligence](#) was commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) to carry out an independent evaluation of sector-led improvement (SLI) in local government. Five months later, councils are in the frontline of the response to Coronavirus and the LGA is playing a vitally important role in supporting them to respond with the sector's support and improvement capacity focussed on this task.

There were two elements in the brief for this evaluation: a review of the extensive evidence the LGA has collected on the take-up, satisfaction with and impact of SLI; and some additional qualitative research to generate reflections on the future of SLI to inform a discussion between the LGA and the local government sector.

The SLI Offer

The LGA's sector-led improvement offer includes a wide-range of activities broadly centred around 23 workstreams. Our evaluation considers the whole of this offer which includes the following strands: Children's Services, Communications, Finance, Innovation, Local Partnerships, Managerial Leadership, One Public Estate, Peer Challenge and Peer Support and Mentoring, Planning, Political Leadership, Productivity and Efficiency, Research and Data, Scrutiny and Workforce.

Key elements of the LGA's improvement offer include: corporate peer challenges; the National Graduate Development Programme; political leadership programmes including the Leadership Academy and Next Generation; and the data platform LG Inform. Member and officer peers are at the heart of the SLI offer, but some support, for example on housing and productivity is provided by expert advisers. A system of extensive and dedicated peer support also operates through Principal Advisors, Regional Teams, Regional Peers and other experienced advisers.

The dissemination of best practice is also an important feature of the offer. Some elements of the SLI offer are universally available, others are subject to an application process which assess the challenges and opportunities faced by councils to support a wide range of issues.

The improvement offer can be categorised under four headings:

- Peer support, peer challenge and mentoring;
- Leadership and development programmes;
- Self-assessment and best practice tools and products; and
- Practical support and bespoke consultancy and advisory.

To make sense of this evidence, we agreed four research questions with the LGA:

1. Does the SLI approach have the continued confidence and engagement of the sector?
2. Has the LGA's support had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself?
3. What is the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation?
4. Can the impact of SLI be enhanced going forward and, if so, how and to what extent?
We will address this question in our second report.

These questions reflect the principles of SLI which have been adopted by the LGA on behalf of the sector. These principles, which underpin SLI in local government, are:

- Councils are responsible for their own performance;
- Stronger local accountability leads to further improvement and councils are accountable locally, not nationally;
- Councils have a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole; and
- The role of the LGA is to help councils by providing the necessary support.

We present our findings in two parts. In Part One we set out our assessment of the evidence on the take up of, satisfaction with and impact of SLI; and in Part Two we set out some reflections on the future of SLI drawing on our qualitative research.

Part One uses the extensive evidence base assembled by the LGA including:

- The LGA's regular membership surveys, with a total of 1,000 survey interviews with senior councillors and officers in each year.
- Multiple satisfaction surveys relating to various SLI offers, for example, Leadership Essentials and Leadership Academy, for a total of approximately 1,200 surveys with an average response rate of 53 per cent.
- Multiple case studies of interventions delivered under three LGA programmes: Productivity Experts, Behavioural Insight and Digital Experts in specific local authorities.

Our qualitative research on the future of SLI set out in Part Two draws on interviews with 23 senior people from the local government sector including council leaders, chief executives and LGA officers and members as well as several sessions with the Improvement and Innovation Board and the leading members of the board. Our interviews were identified in a number of ways: by the LGA, by ourselves, and as a result of people expressing a desire to participate in the research. The LGA has also commissioned an internal review of corporate peer challenges (CPC).

PART ONE: INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE

This part of the report sets out the results of our independent assessment of the LGA's evidence base. It concludes with our findings and reflections in relation to the four research questions we agreed with the LGA.

The evidence

In this section we set out our assessment of the evidence supplied by the LGA and the sector. We do so under four headings:

- Awareness of SLI;
- Perceptions of the validity of the SLI approach;
- Satisfaction with the SLI offer; and
- Evidence of the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation.

We have included a small number of charts drawing on our analysis in this section to illustrate key findings. A full slide pack is included in Annex B.

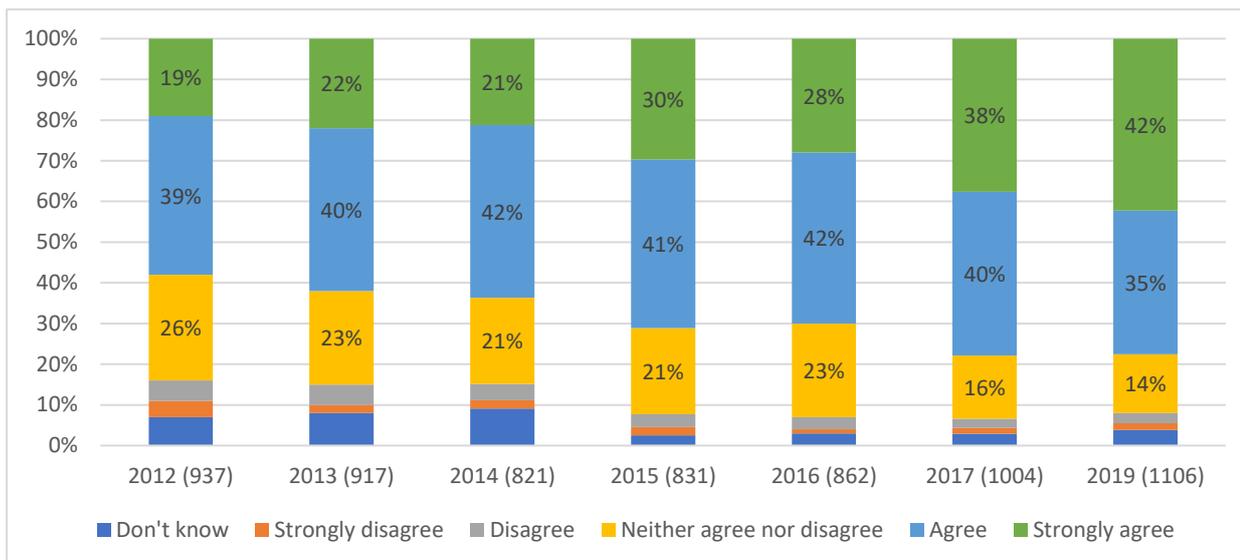
Awareness of SLI

There is a good level of awareness of SLI among managerial and political leaders. Between 2012 and 2016 they were asked in the LGA membership survey whether they had heard about SLI. The question was not asked in subsequent surveys, but over that period there was a steady increase in awareness of SLI culminating in the position in 2016 when over 80 per cent of respondents had some knowledge of SLI, over 20 per cent had heard a lot about it, and half had heard a lot or a moderate amount about it.

Validity of the SLI Approach

As Fig 1 shows, since 2012, there has been an increase similar to the growth in SLI awareness in the proportion of local government leaders who consider SLI to be the right approach for the sector to pursue in the current context. The prevailing view is that SLI is the right approach, while further analysis shows there is no statistically significant difference in the response for different types of council and region. It is also worth noting that the latest LGA membership survey shows that, although the proportion of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that SLI is the right approach consolidated at just under 80 per cent between 2017 and 2019, the proportion strongly agreeing continued to increase.

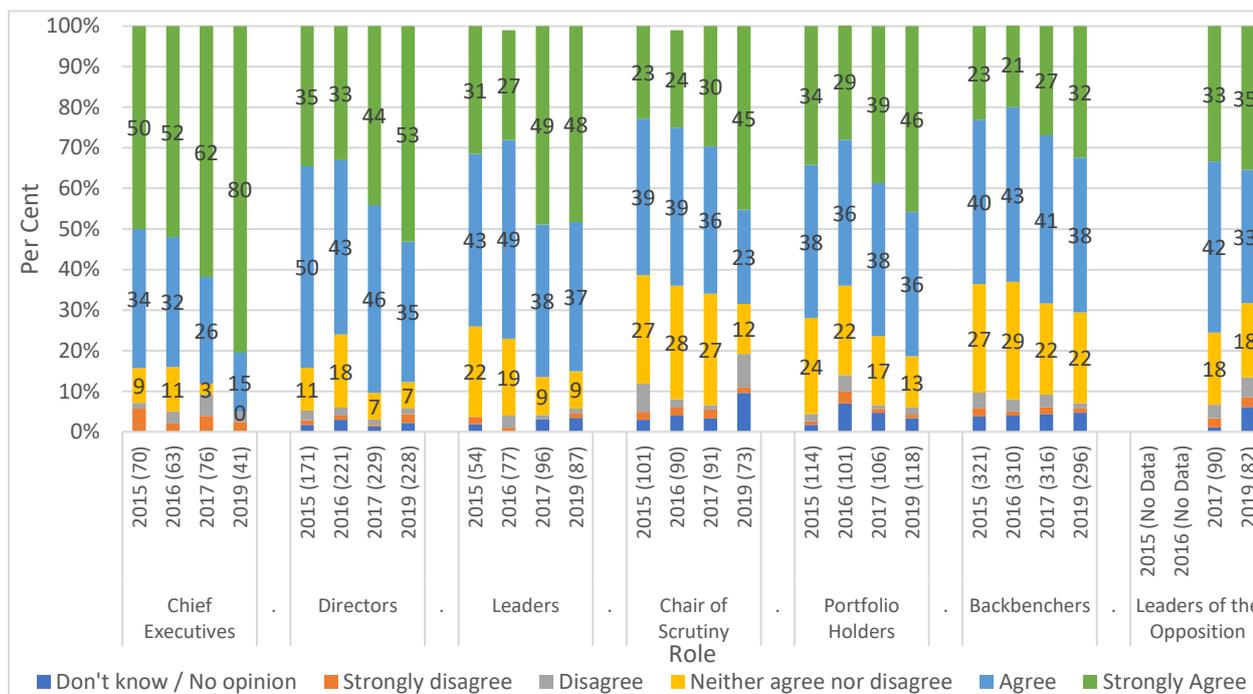
Fig 1: To what extent do you agree that SLI is the right approach in the current context?



Source: LGA Membership Survey, respondents in brackets

Fig 2 breaks down agreement on the appropriateness of the SLI approach by respondent type. It shows a degree of variation between different years, but in the context of overall high levels of support for the approach. It is worth noting that, with some variation between years, a higher proportion of leaders, chief executives and directors agree that SLI is the right approach. It is also interesting that the proportion of chairs of scrutiny and portfolio holders who agree is increasing, particularly the percentage of scrutiny chairs who strongly agree. Leaders of the opposition, who were not included in the survey until 2017, also believe that SLI is the right approach, as do most frontline councillors (referred to as 'backbenchers' in the perception survey).

Fig 2: Sector-Led Improvement is the right approach in the current context by role by year



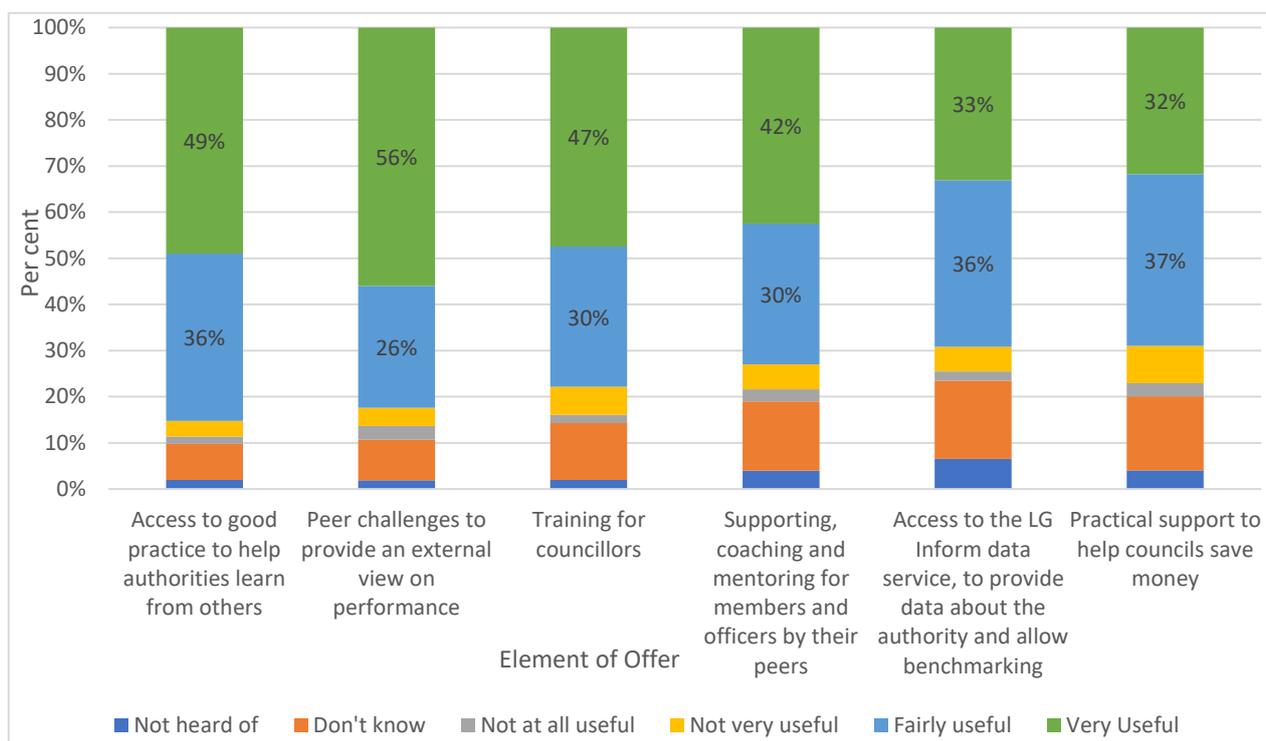
Source: LGA Perception Survey, respondents in brackets

It is clear, therefore, that particularly among council leaders, there is a widespread high level of confidence that SLI is the right approach.

Satisfaction with the SLI offer

The level of satisfaction with the various SLI offers is very high. As Fig 3 shows, around 70 per cent of respondents or more say that they find each offer very or fairly useful. As the detailed charts in the annex show, there are some variations in respondents' level of satisfaction depending on their role, their authority type and region but all within the context of high levels overall. Fig 4 shows the analysis broken down by respondent role.

Fig 3: How useful are the following elements of the LGA's SLI improvement offer?



Source: LGA Perception Survey 2019

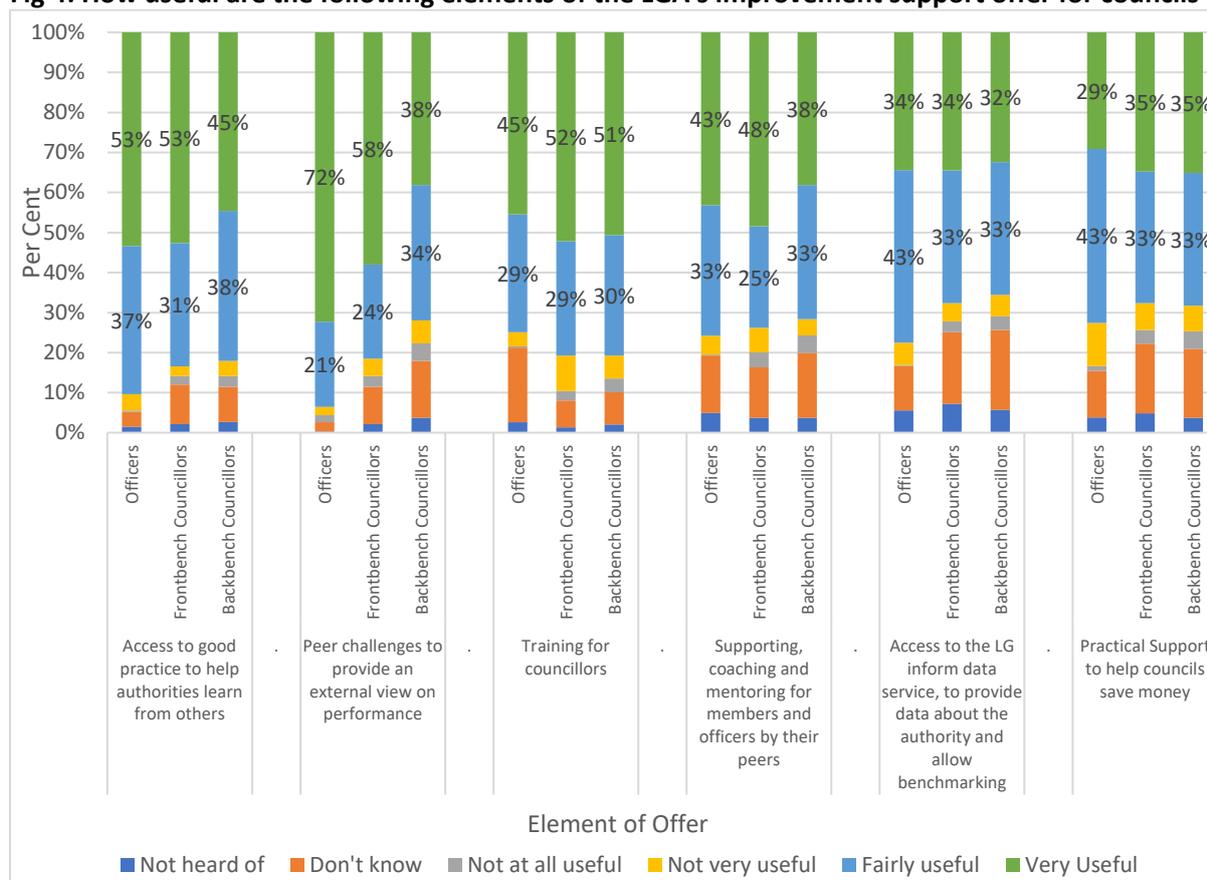
Base: All respondents (1106)

Between 2017 and 2020, all councils in England took part in at least six out of 23 SLI programmes offered by the LGA.

The average across all councils was twelve programmes.

- *Analysis of engagement data from 2017 to 2020*

Fig 4: How useful are the following elements of the LGA's improvement support offer for councils



Source: LGA Perception Survey 2019

Base: 343 Officers, 374 Frontbench Councillors, 295 Backbench Councillors

There are, however, several findings worth noting:

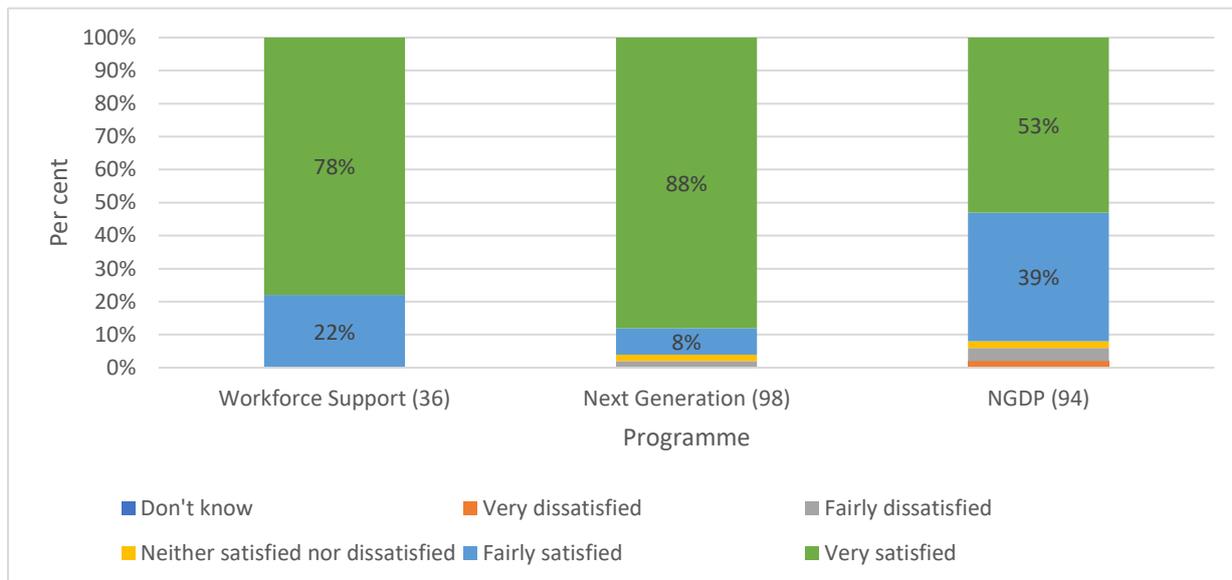
- There are some differences in view on the usefulness of the SLI offer between officers and members, with officers generally being slightly more positive. This difference is less pronounced in the 2019 survey than it was in 2017 suggesting an alignment of perceptions.
- The results of the 2019 membership survey show similarly positive perceptions of the usefulness of the SLI offer on the part of leaders and portfolio holders on the one hand and less awareness among frontline councillors on the other hand (except for their views on peer challenge). This has changed since 2017 when frontline councillors were slightly less positive about many of the SLI offers.
- The usefulness of peer challenges and access to good practice are particularly high. The lower rating for practical support is likely to reflect the fact that it accessed only by a small proportion of councils each year. The lower rating for LG Inform is likely to reflect the fact that it is most likely to be used by less senior officers than those surveyed.

There is no pattern that is statistically significant in relation to how useful respondents find the LGA's support offer and their council's location in the country – or the type of council for which they work. It does seem, however, that respondents from London are slightly less likely to say that the SLI offers

are very or fairly useful. This may reflect the role of for example London Councils and other London-focussed networks which also contribute to the overall improvement in the sector.

The LGA also collected evidence on the satisfaction with the SLI offers among participants. Data included in the annex shows that 100 per cent of councils receiving a corporate peer challenge in 2018/19 were very or fairly satisfied, with over 80 per cent being very satisfied. In addition, as Fig 5 shows, the level of satisfaction among direct beneficiaries for the other offers is also very high.

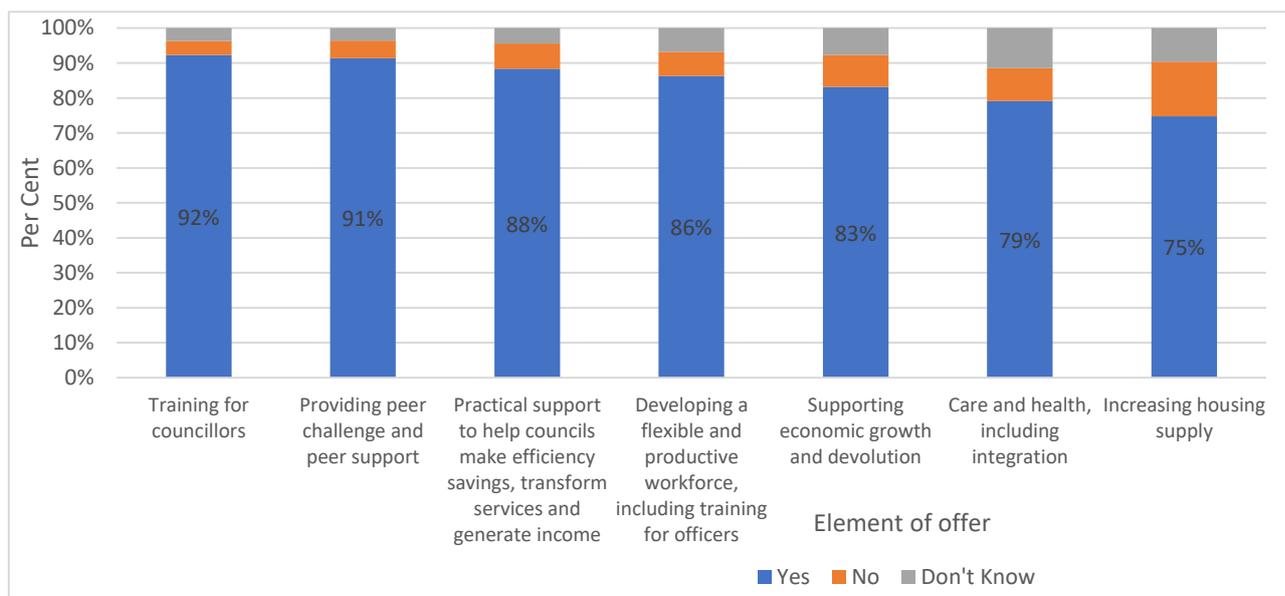
Fig 5: Overall satisfaction with different programmes



Source: Workforce Support, Next Generation, NGDP initial feedback surveys 2018/19

Base: In brackets

Fig 6: Do you think that the LGA should continue to provide support in the following areas



Source: LGA Perception Survey 2019

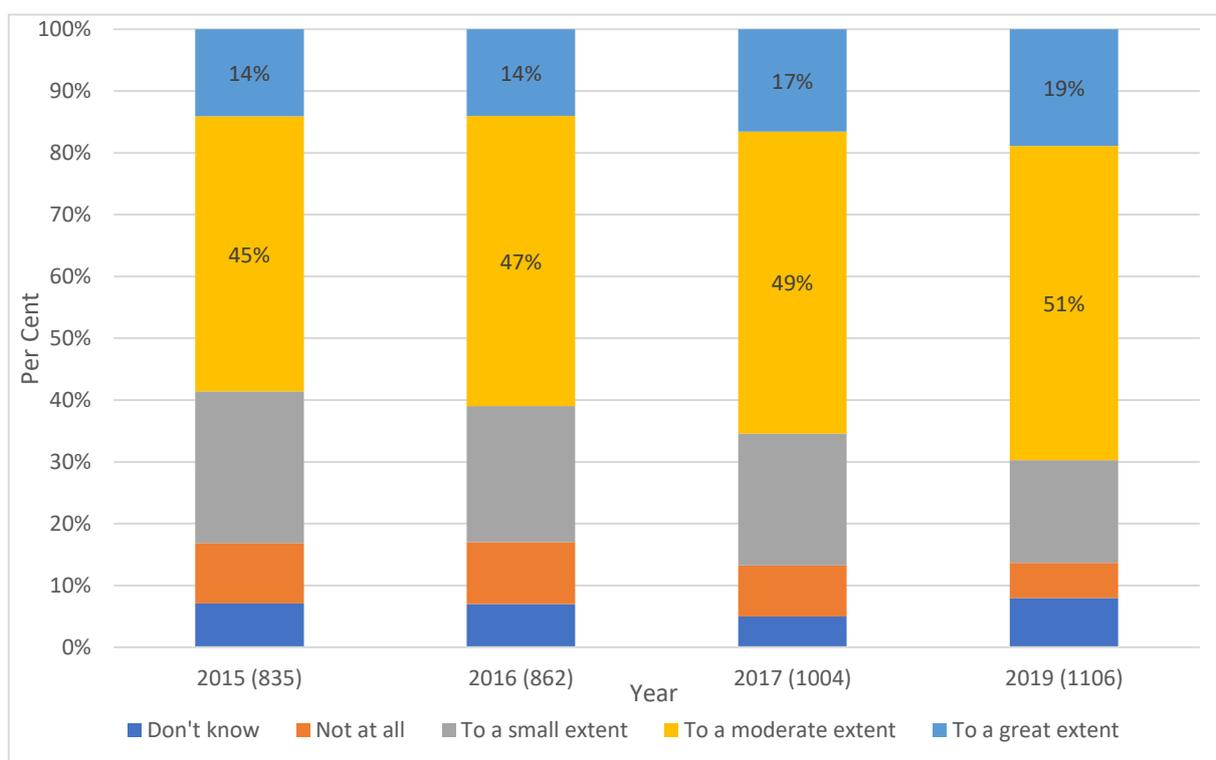
Base: All Respondents

The impact of SLI

The LGA collects evidence of the impact of the various SLI offers, based on surveys, case studies and feedback forms from participants. In this section we explore several different parts of the SLI offer to demonstrate the impact made. The results are very positive.

As Fig 7 shows, around 70 per cent of the respondents to the LGA’s latest membership survey report that improvement support has positively impacted on their council to a great or moderate extent. This proportion has increased slightly over the last four years and almost 90 per cent of respondents now report that SLI has some positive impact.

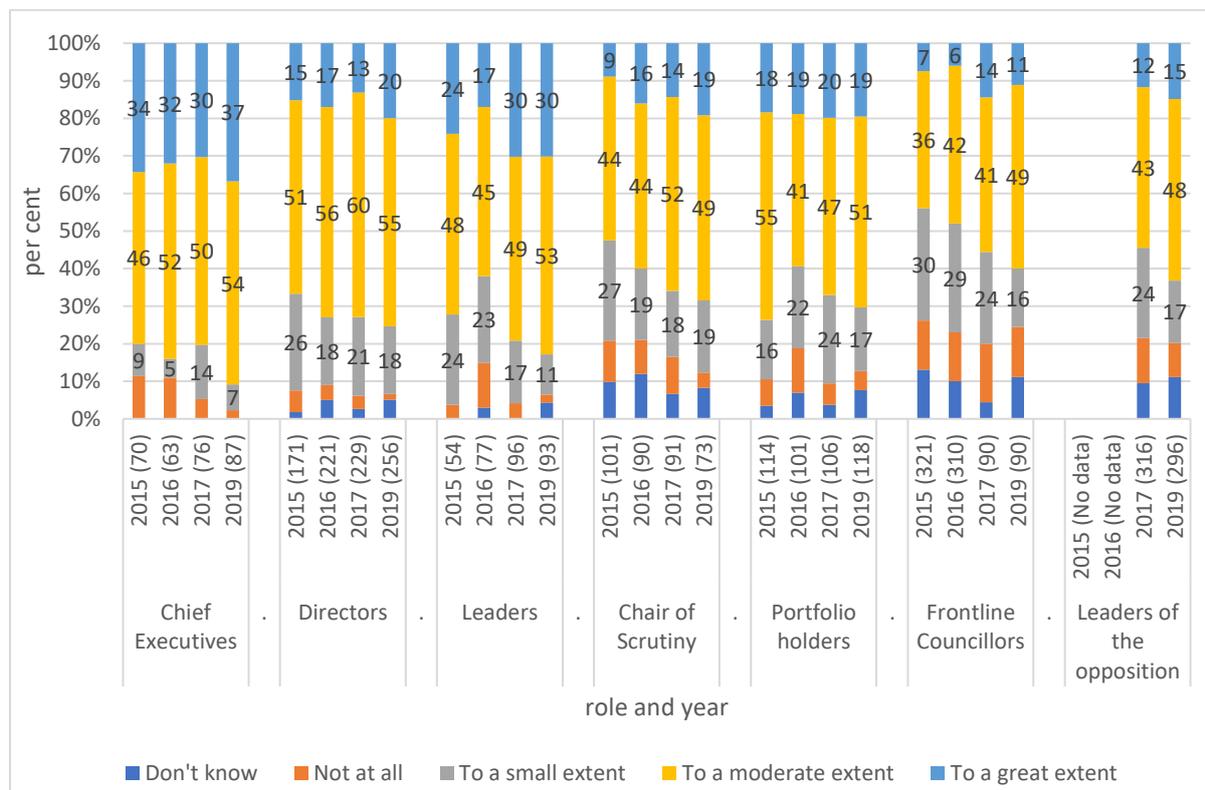
Fig 7: To what extent do you think the improvement support has had a positive impact on your authority



Source: LGA Perception Survey 2015-2019, respondents in brackets

The more detailed analysis in the annex shows marginal differences across council types in the extent to which respondents think the LGA’s support has had a positive impact. Breaking down responses by type of respondents (Fig 8), senior officers and council leaders gave the most positive feedback, as they did when asked if SLI is the right approach (Fig 2). While these only indicate that there could be a significant difference in response for different roles, both measures show increasing levels of support for SLI on the part of chairs of scrutiny, portfolio holders and frontline councillors.

Fig 8: To what extent do you think that the improvement support has had a positive impact on your authority?



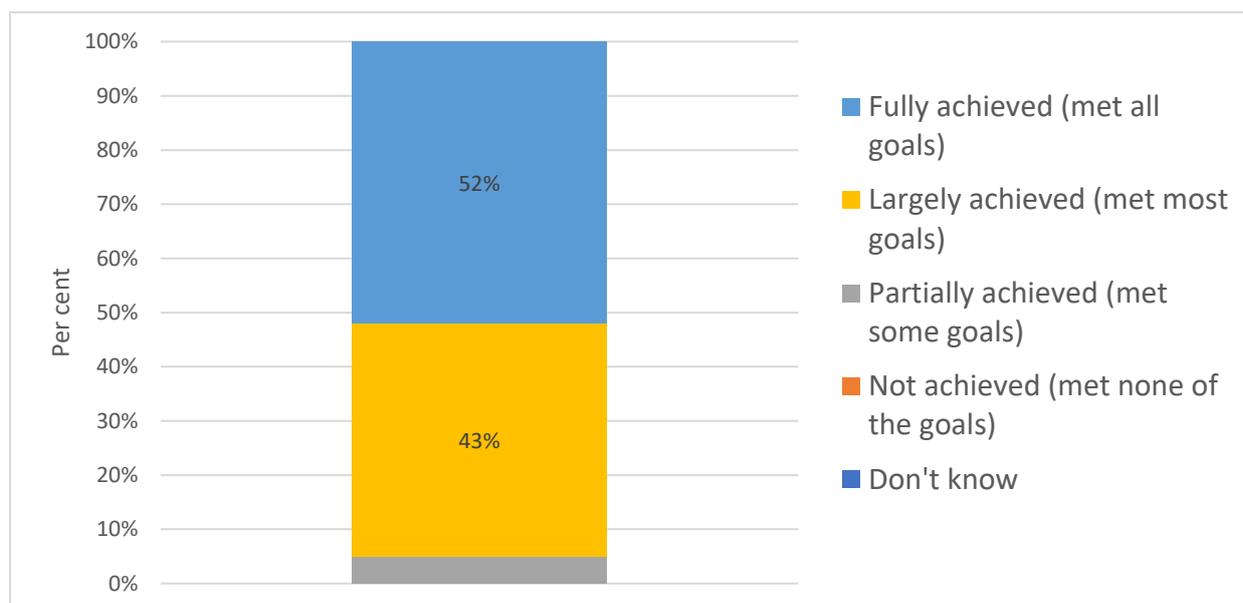
Source: LGA perception survey 2015-2019

Fig 9 and Table 1 draw from the Corporate Peer Challenge 2018 feedback survey, with 66 responses from the Leaders and Chief Executives of the 42 Councils which had a CPC that year. This looks specifically at the extent to which corporate peer challenges met councils' objectives, with over 90 per cent of respondents reporting that it met either all of most of their objectives.

Table 1: What was your main objective in taking part in the corporate peer challenge?

	Per cent
To get an independent view on our current plans and strategies	45%
To get an external challenge on our way of doing things	29%
To inform our future strategic thinking and direction	17%
To get challenge, support or advice on a specific issue	6%
Other	2%
Don't know	2%

Fig 9: Objectives achieved in the Corporate peer Challenge



Source: Corporate Peer Challenge 2018/19 feedback survey

Base: all respondents (65)

The feedback in terms of the impact of corporate peer challenges is very positive. In response to a survey of councils which had a CPC in 2018-19:

- Almost three quarters said the CPC had a positive impact on the delivery of the council's priorities to either a great or moderate extent and a similar proportion said the same about the council's external reputation.
- Over half the respondents (20) said that the CPC had acted as a trigger for further improvement support from the LGA.
- Two thirds of respondents said it had a positive effect on partnerships and 68 per cent said it led to improved behaviours within the council.

"Significant impact in driving change and improvement throughout the council and in particular in assisting members in recognising the need to change."

"Confidence in the council, given an external authoritative and positive view received from corporate peer challenge."

"It gave us external validation of our progress and achievements, which has been a great motivation for the council and our staff. It gave us the confidence to present ourselves on the national stage and to share our successes."

"Provided challenge that supported greater focus on financial sustainability whilst providing assurance of performance in other areas."

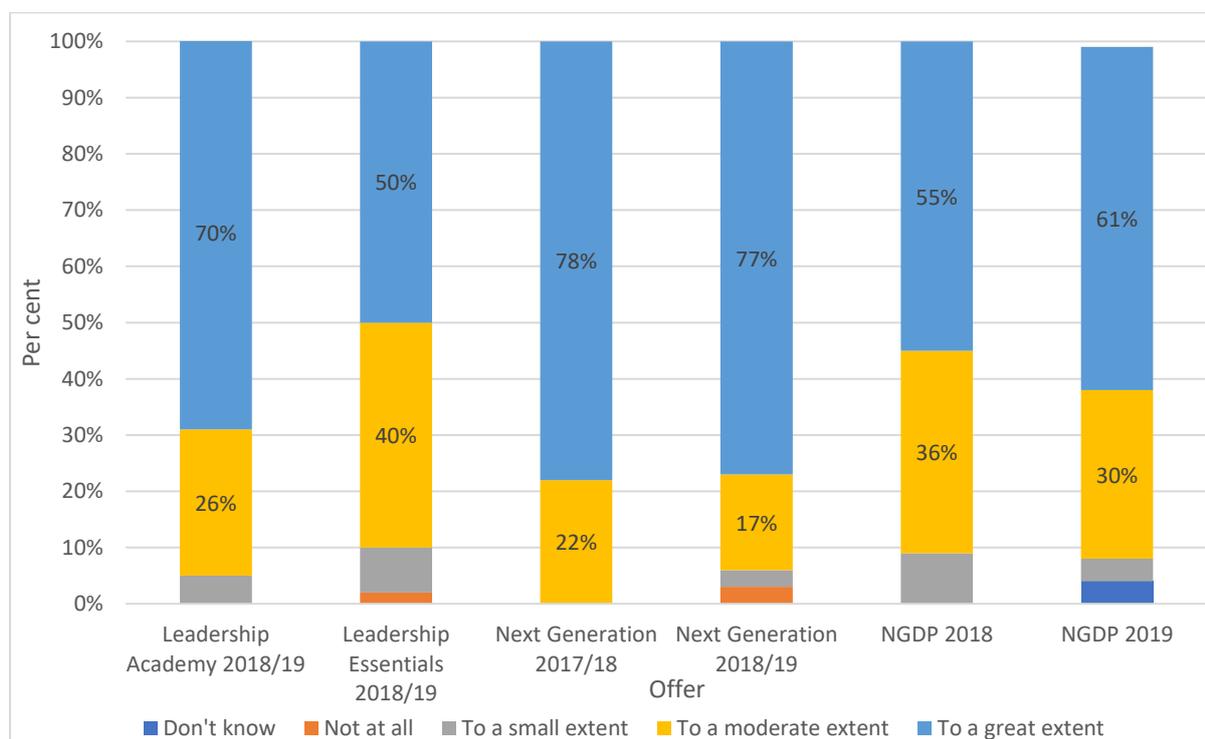
"The CPC is a must have 'MOT' for all councils. The independent assessment and fresh perspective can help to recalibrate Members and officers for the journey ahead."

Quotes from Chief Executives who participated in a Peer Challenge through 2018-19

There is also evidence of the positive impact of SLI on officers and councillors who have participated in the LGA’s training and development programmes. Over 90 per cent of National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) participants in 2019 said that they felt more confident about getting a management role, to a great or moderate extent, as a result of the programme. A similar proportion of Next Generation councillors felt that the same about their ability to carry out their role.

As Fig 10 shows a very high proportion of participants in the NGDP, Leadership Academy, Leadership Essentials and Next Generation programmes felt that participation has had a positive impact on their ability to carry out their role.

Fig 10: To what extent, if at all, do you think that participation in the programme has helped you improve the way you carry out your role?



Source: Leadership Academy 2018/19, Leadership Essentials 2018/19, Next Generation 2017/18 and 2018/9, NGDP Impact Surveys, 2017/18 and 2018/19 Impact Surveys

Base: All respondents

Fig 10 also shows that there is a considerable amount of reported improvement in participants’ ability to carry out their role. For all offers open to individuals, at least 90 per cent of those who attended a course believe it improved their ability to carry out their role. The Next Generation course has particularly good feedback, with 100 per cent and 94 per cent of respondents for the 2017/18 and 2018/19 cohort respectively believing the course had positively impacted on their ability to carry out their role. This demonstrates the positive impact that these programmes have on leadership and productivity.

Just over a quarter of respondents to a survey of participants in Leadership Essentials courses in 2018/19 reported that they had either progressed to a new role or had taken on additional responsibilities since attending the course.

“Helped me to understand the role of the Health and Wellbeing Board, and wider health systems, and my role as Chair.”

Leadership Essentials, Health and Wellbeing 2018-19

“It’s easy to operate within a ‘bubble’ and see your authority as the only way to operate. Information from the course and interaction with others from fire authorities all over the UK opened my eyes to different practice some good, some bad but all valuable as a learning experience.”

Leadership Essentials, Fire and Rescue 2018-19

“The course has given me the confidence to ask more in-depth questions of officers and understand the roles of officers outside partners and structures.”

Leadership Essentials Children’s Services Programme 2018-19

Similarly, 99 per cent of respondents to a survey of NGDP participants in 2019 felt, to a great or moderate extent, that the programme had positively impacted on their ability to further their careers. The same proportion said they would be very or fairly likely to recommend to NGDP to others if asked about it.

“Specific support was also received in the review of the development appraisal for a council-owned site... that forms part of the Joint Venture delivery package. This review challenged aspects of the financial package and gave the council the assurance it needed to proceed.”

Housing advisor support quote and impact statement 2017-18

Satisfaction with support provided by housing advisers is also high. A survey of councils receiving support in 2017-18 showed that:

- Of 14 responding councils aiming to increase housing supply, almost three quarters said the support they received had helped them do so to a great or moderate extent;
- Three quarters of responding councils seeking support on action to reduce homelessness said the support they received had helped to a great or moderate extent.

The LGA has also built a substantive set of case studies on the impact other SLI offers. The case studies demonstrate the key principles of the SLI offer and highlight how councils are working with partners to develop and deliver innovative projects. In many cases, these projects are having positive impact and outcomes for residents. These are impressive in their own right, but it is difficult to scale up this evidence to present a comprehensive picture. Three examples are provided below.

Behavioural Insights Programme:

Liverpool City Council worked with the LGA and the Behavioural Insights Team to trial methods to reduce sugar consumption in hospital environments. This intervention influenced decision making by consumers by putting red signs on shelves with high sugar chilled drinks on alternating weeks. This ultimately reduced purchases of these drinks, but maintained purchases of chilled drinks overall, suggesting consumers were switching to lower sugar drinks. The intervention was statistically significant at the 10 per cent significance level. The intervention is being sustained.

Behavioural Insights Programme:

Worcestershire County Council worked with the Behavioural Insights Team to reduce the number of unpaid service invoices for domiciliary care users, in addition to encouraging sign-ups to direct debit. This intervention was designed around 58 behaviourally informed nudges on the invoice and reminder letters, which increased the perceived value of the service and increased the perceived consequences of non-payment. At the ten percent significance level, the interventions increased direct debit signups by 61 per cent and payment via the website and telephone line by 33 per cent.

Productivity Experts Programme:

The programme was employed to assist with the design and delivery for the shared regeneration service for Lewes District Council and Eastbourne Borough Council. This service was established to deliver savings considering the loss of central Revenue Support Grants. The result of the intervention was a high-level strategic 'position statement' which encouraged the team to clarify its role with upcoming projects in the pipeline. This left the new service in a strong place to deliver projects and save up to £2.7m per year through the sharing of management, services and IT.

Finally, Shared Intelligence has also carried out an evaluation of the LGA's Children's Services SLI this year. The overall findings identified that the support programme has had a significantly positive impact on improvements in councils' children's services. This impact has been demonstrated in a number of ways including the provision of a unique offer for councils at a political level, the highly valued relationships that are formed with Children's Improvement Advisors, and the fact that the overall offer is well rounded and reflective of the needs of the sector.

In considering recommendations that could support this already highly valued offer, these have been summarised as 1) the need to retain flexibility in the offer to adapt to and reflect emerging issues such as SEND need and Coronavirus responses. 2) The need for better use of data between children's services SLI offer and the wider programme of support to improve awareness of the breadth of opportunities for support that currently exists. 3) Encouraging a whole-council approach to ensuring the greatest impact can be made across Children's Services. 4) Extending the support to lead members to a wider political basis to encourage understanding of the challenges faced and as a route to encouraging more cross-sector collaboration. 5) Developing a more structured approach to supporting lead members and encouraging more councillors to take on and contribute to peer mentoring.

The reach of the SLI Offer

In the three years to 2020...



... A total of over 4,000 sector led improvements were delivered...



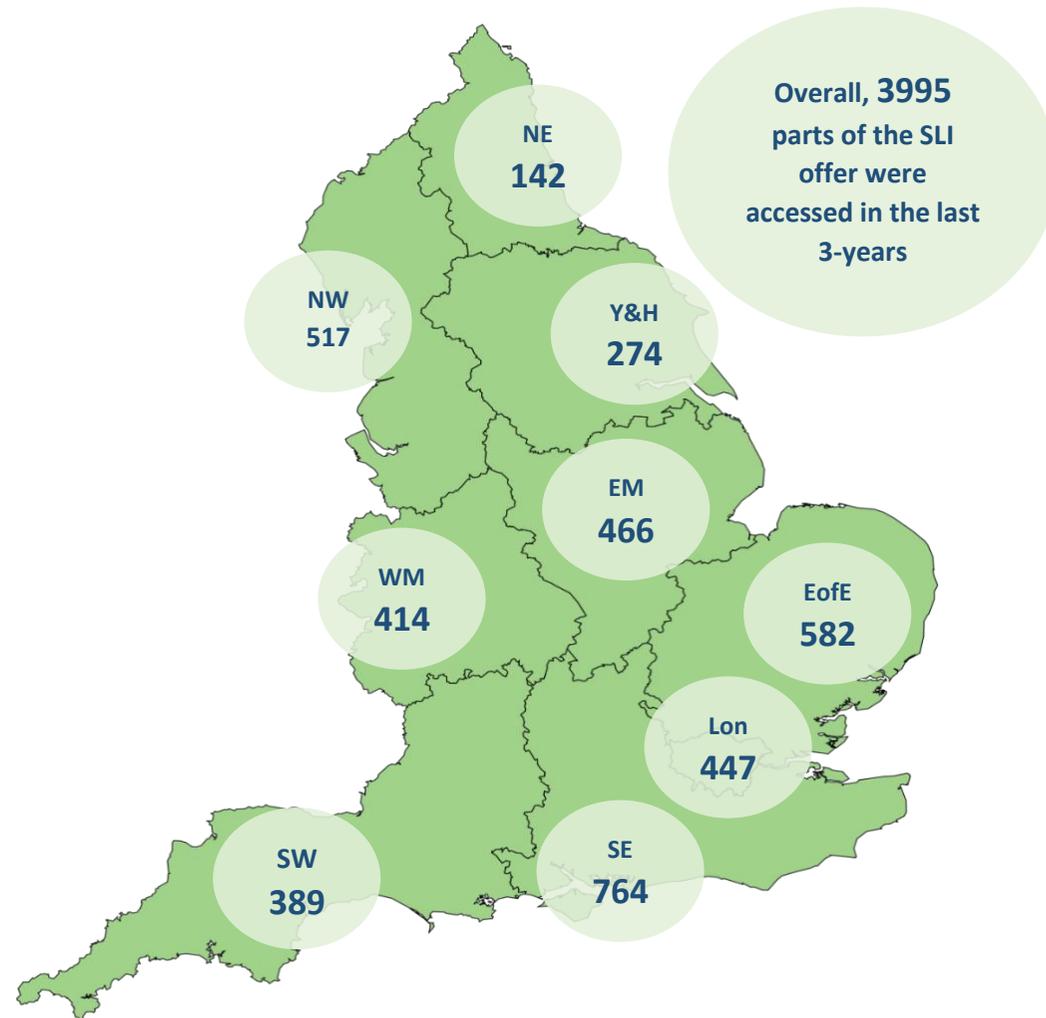
... ALL councils received at least 6 parts of the offer with an average of 12 parts of the offer...



... 447 Peer Challenges and follow-up visits took place...



...This included 182 Corporate Peer Challenges...



Our findings and reflections

In this section, we set out the findings we have drawn from our assessment of the evidence. Initially we draw on the findings to explore the three key research questions. We then go on to:

- Explore the nature of the evidence available on the impact of SLI;
- Identify some findings from our assessment of the evidence which are particularly relevant to thinking about the future of SLI;
- Set out some reflections from this work for the LGA's role in supporting councils on Coronavirus.

Does the SLI approach have the continued confidence and engagement of the sector?

There is no doubt, based on the evidence we have assessed, that SLI has the continued confidence and engagement of the sector. The levels of take-up of the SLI offers are high, the satisfaction levels are high, and there is a widely held view that the LGA should continue to deliver its offer and that SLI is the right approach in the current context.

The evidence shows high levels of satisfaction in the SLI approach. Responses given to questions about one's awareness of SLI, the validity of the approach and satisfaction with the offer do not differ significantly when analysed by region or by council type. This means there is broad and consistent agreement with SLI as an approach. There are, however, two notable variations in respondents' views about SLI that we have concluded merit highlighting:

- The emerging variations in support for and satisfaction with SLI on the part of officers, frontbench councillors and backbench councillors;
- The emerging variations between the most distinctively sector-led elements of the offer which return the highest levels of satisfaction among respondents, namely peer challenge and support and political leadership, and other programmes of work

Has the LGA's support had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself?

The evidence we assessed did not directly address this question. It is, however, possible to draw reasonable inferences from the evidence we have seen and to conclude that the LGA's support has positively impacted on the sector's capacity to improve itself. We would point to:

- The very high levels of take-up and satisfaction with the SLI offer;
- The increase in the proportion of senior leaders within the sector who consider that SLI is the right approach and the consolidation of that view at a high level;
- The high levels of support from senior leaders for the LGA continuing to deliver the SLI offer;
- Feedback from councils benefiting from peer reviews that over half of them draw down further SLI support from the LGA.

This all points to a consistent view that SLI is now an integral part of how local government operates as sector.

What is the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation?

It is clear from our assessment of the evidence that there is extensive and very positive evidence of the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation. There is extensive case study material on the impact of SLI interventions in individual councils. We are also aware from other research¹ we have done for the LGA that councils are able to point to action they have taken in response to SLI interventions and the resulting positive impact. Through its work, the LGA has developed a good understanding of the impact of SLI.

The LGA's interim evaluation of SLI supplements the findings drawn from its satisfaction and membership surveys and case studies with other evidence on council performance.² In 2018, the LGA analysed a group of 104 metrics, across the full range of council activity, to provide an objective assessment of local government performance since 2009/10. This showed a positive direction of travel, with nearly three quarters of the metrics having seen an improvement over that period. It is important to appreciate that over a similar period local government faced significant budgetary challenges: The National Audit Office estimated that local government saw a decrease in funding of 49 per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2017/18. These trends – improving council performance at a time of reduced resources – coincided with the high levels of satisfaction and engagement with SLI referred to in this report.

It is not possible, however, to *directly* attribute positive evidence on council performance to the impact of SLI. Our answer to this question, therefore, is that there is a high level of confidence within the sector that SLI has had a positive impact on council performance supported by case study material, but that if the sector is to fully discharge the SLI principle on collective responsibility for council performance further reflection is required on the relationship between SLI and council performance.

Evidence of the impact of SLI

The LGA currently plays an important role in collecting evidence on the impact of SLI. This benefits from its understanding of the thinking behind the programme and the challenges that councils face. It is important to explore ways of strengthening the existing evidence base particularly in relation to the impact on the performance of individual councils and the whole sector. This is relevant to the importance of maintaining confidence in the approach within government and other stakeholders. It also goes to the heart of the principles underpinning SLI, particularly the reference to “a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole.”

The building blocks for collecting evidence on impact, particularly CPCs, are already in place. They include: the self-assessment carried out before a CPC takes place, the feedback report, the council's action plan following the CPC and follow-up visits which the LGA recommends should take place a year after the CPC. We understand that the LGA intends to reinforce its expectations around the production of an action plan following a CPC and follow-up visits. An important by-product of this would be to strengthen the evidence base and its usage. Similar material is available for other SLI offers.

¹ Evaluation of the Children's Services SLI (Shared Intelligence 2020), Rising to the Challenge: Lessons of sector-led improvement in local government (LGA and Si 2019), Evaluation of NGDP (Si 2019), Evaluation of Apprenticeship Accelerator Programme (Si 2019 and 2020)

² Evaluation of sector-led improvement Interim Summary Report (LGA November 2018)

It is also important to recognise that action to influence councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation is not a quick fix. The impact will become evident over the medium to long term. There is a tension between this and the short-term nature of the memorandum of understanding between the LGA and MHCLG on SLI and the objectives and priorities set out in it. The MoU is negotiated annually. It is important to consider whether a longer-term agreement between the LGA and government could help to create the conditions for a longer-term approach to the collection of evidence on the impact of SLI.

Considerations for the future

Our fourth research question is to consider whether the impact of SLI can be enhanced going forward and, if so, how and to what extent. We explore this question in more detail in the second half of this report but a number of the issues we have explored in this assessment of the evidence are relevant to this question.

First, we have been struck by the evidence of a gradual increase in support for SLI among all councillors. This can be seen in Fig 2 (Is SLI the right approach?), Fig 4 (How useful is SLI?) and Fig 8 (Has SLI had a positive impact?). This is potentially significant in the light of the emerging view that the member narrative is critically important in ensuring that SLI has more traction with councils in challenging circumstances.

Second, it is evident from our discussions with leaders and chief executives that there is an appetite for the greater use of data and evidence in supporting SLI including developing the potential concept of sector-led assurance. This contrasts with the slightly lower levels of satisfaction with LG Inform than for other parts of the offer which has been attributed to the likelihood that it is most used by more less senior officers. If, however, more emphasis is placed on the use of data and evidence in SLI it will be essential that it is also made available in ways which are accessible to leaders and chief executives.

Finally, we have been struck by the fact that satisfaction levels are highest in relation to the most distinctively sector-led aspects of the overall SLI offer, peer challenge and leadership development. It is important that this finding is considered in thinking about the future direction and shape of the overall offer.

Lesson for support in relation to Coronavirus

The evidence on which this report is based was all collected before Coronavirus struck and the LGA's support is currently focused on councils' response to and recovery from the outbreak. We will pay particular attention to this area in our report on the future of SLI but reflecting on it in the light of the findings of this assessment we have identified three key findings.

1. First, the high levels of satisfaction with and engagement in the SLI offer suggest that the LGA has a very firm foundation on which to build in providing support to councils on the response to and recovery from Coronavirus.
2. Second, high quality political and community leadership will be critically important in supporting places, communities, residents and businesses over the coming months and years. The LGA's track record in designing and delivering leadership programmes

with very high satisfaction levels suggest that it is well-placed to support senior politicians to develop new skills for changing times.

3. Third, it is important to think about the ways in which SLI is delivered in the context of continued tough and disruptive social distancing. This reinforces the importance of thinking about an increased role for data and evidence in SLI and the potential for some peer interventions and development programmes being delivered remotely. We are aware that the LGA is actively considering this and is expected to launch a new remotely delivered recovery peer support offer in early July.
4. Finally, this is an issue on which there is currently no best practice, but extensive emerging practice. We are aware that the LGA has put in place arrangements to capture this, building on the high levels of support for the LGA's work in disseminating good practice. This should provide added value for councils in this challenging period.

PART TWO: REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE

Our starting point for thinking about the future of SLI are the four principles which currently underpin it, and which were set out in the introduction to this report. Our research suggests that there is continuing support for these principles, but it has also identified an appetite in the sector to explore what more could be done to apply those principles in practice. We have structured our findings under four headings:

- The ownership of SLI, the role of MHCLG and communication;
- The contribution of data and evidence;
- SLI and councils in challenging circumstances;
- Some other reflections on the future of SLI, including the impact of Coronavirus.

Ownership of SLI, the role of MHCLG and communications

In this section we consider whether in thinking about enhancing SLI the LGA should explore an interconnected set of issues around ownership of SLI, the role of MHCLG and the profile of SLI and communications on it.

Ownership

A striking feature of SLI is the breadth of the offer and the diversity of the approaches involved, for peer support and challenge through training and development to bespoke advice.

The evidence we reviewed in our first report shows high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the offer. It is striking from our interviews with key stakeholders in the sector for this report, however, that few of our interviewees had a comprehensive appreciation of the offer as a whole.

The position is further complicated by the fact that the LGA is not the only supplier of improvement support. Other national membership bodies such as CIPFA, SOLACE, ADASS, ADCS, ADEPT and ADPH do so and many councils commission improvement support from consultancies and other private sector suppliers. It is important to stress, however, that the councillor element of the LGA's SLI offer is distinctive.

This matters because of the weight that is placed on SLI being owned by the sector. It is significant that many of the people we interviewed talked about SLI as if it is an LGA initiative rather than something owned by the sector. Decisions inevitably have to be made about the balance between the various elements reflecting both demand and supply considerations and the annual negotiations with MHCLG on the SLI Memorandum of Understanding. It is difficult for people to influence or feel ownership of decisions about the scale and nature of different elements of SLI offer if they do not have a good understanding of the whole offer.

This has implication for communications around SLI which we explore below. It also suggests that one of the areas the LGA may wish to explore in terms of enhancing SLI is the scope for more involvement of the sector in decisions about the offer.

Ultimate responsibility for the LGA's SLI work lies with the association's Improvement and Innovation Board. It has substantive discussions on SLI and has, for example, contributed on a number of occasions to our research. The chair of the board and many of its members are powerful advocates of SLI and the LGA's role in delivering it.

We understand that several SLI programmes have advisory groups. Support on commercialisation, for example, is informed by the Advanced Commercialisation Group, comprising a number of chief executives and directors. The work on digitalisation is steered by the Local Government Delivery Council and there is also a national advisory group on procurement and commissioning. There is, however, no advisory group in relation to, for example, the CPC programme or the SLI offer as a whole. We understand, however, the LGA's internal review of peer reviews is considering recommending a sounding board for the Corporate Peer Challenge

The LGA should consider ways in which the sector could directly influence the SLI offer. This could add value by:

- Helping to embed wider sector ownership of SLI;
- Maintaining an overview of the offer as a whole and individual elements, including those provided by other organisations such as the officer associations and societies;
- Helping to ensure that the offer meets the changing needs of councils;
- Contributing to a renewed drive to better communicate the importance of SLI, the support that is available, the learning from it and its impact.

The role of MHCLG

The SLI offer is currently funded by a grant from MHCLG with some additional funding from other government departments. Before the current arrangements were introduced, it was funded through what was called a "top slice" of the local government finance settlement before it was distributed to councils. The grant is awarded on the basis of an annual memorandum of understanding between the MHCLG and the LGA which sets out the various elements of the offer, the planned outputs and the outcomes it is intended to deliver.

We have not identified any significant concerns about the way in which SLI is funded. Indeed, some interviewees argued that MHCLG's role as funder legitimises it issuing a statement of expectations in terms of council participation in SLI. Interviewees also suggested that civil servants should regularly be members of CPC teams. They felt this would add value to the process, providing government with useful learning about the current position in local government and the challenges and opportunities it faces, and about the robustness of the process.

There are, however, concerns that the fact that the MoU is agreed annually drives a short-term focus constraining both the impact of SLI and the sector's ability to evidence that impact. As we noted in our evaluation of the evidence on SLI this is not compatible with the reality that action to influence councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation is not a quick fix. The impact will become evident over the medium to long term. The annual cycle also mitigates against securing meaningful sector engagement in shaping the SLI offer.

Communication and profile

All the people we interviewed are sensitive to the balance that needs to be struck between the LGA's role as a membership organisation and its improvement work, including the need to communicate difficult messages to some councils. It is clear from our interviews that a majority of stakeholders consider that the LGA can and should play both roles, but that in thinking about how SLI could be enhanced the LGA should explore two areas.

First, that it should consider whether being even more explicit about the independence of CPC teams and other people delivering SLI support, and communicating that fact, would help it fulfil its representational and improvement roles.

Second, there is an important question to be explored about whether, in the words of one of our interviewees, "SLI needs more oxygen within the LGA". This could involve communicating more effectively within the sector and beyond:

- The full breadth of the SLI offer in a way that is accessible to leaders and chief executives as well as narrower target audiences for each element of the offer;
- The two-way nature of the process in which the peers involved in delivering SLI activity learn and develop as a result;
- The principles on which SLI is based, particularly the concept of collective responsibility, and the association's expectations in relation to participation, openness to external challenge, publication and follow up action;
- The benefits of participation in terms of impact on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation, including the benefits of providing peer support (such as the learning for members of CPC teams);
- The learning for the sector as a whole from SLI interventions. There is a mass of rich material in CPC reports and other SLI interventions, from which key messages could be extracted and disseminated within the sector.

Communications with peers has also been identified by our interviewees as an area in which the SLI process could be enhanced. Several of them expressed concern that, for example, members of CPC teams are not consistently kept in loop in about action that has been taken following a peer visit. In one case the peer chief executive was concerned that a council was not acting on the review's recommendations. In fact, the relevant LGA principal adviser was in detailed discussions with the council and referring them to a significant amount of follow-on SLI support. We understand that continued engagement of members of peer teams is being considered as part of the internal review of CPCs. The LGA should explore what other steps could be taken to mobilise its member and officer peers as advocates for SLI.

The contribution of data and evidence

It is clear from our interviews and review of the evidence that the whole question whether more use could be made of data and evidence in SLI is one of the issues that the LGA should explore in thinking about how SLI can be enhanced.

Data and evidence are already important and integral features of the SLI offer. The self-assessment process is widely recognised as being an important element of the CPC process. And LG Inform is a well-used and widely respected component of the SLI offer.

There is a view that the more systematic use of data could be explored. There is some support for going further and exploring the development of what some stakeholders call “sector-led assurance”. This could include utilising comparative information to enable councils to assess themselves and where appropriate compare themselves with others. There is also an appetite for exploring the presentation of data so that it is more easily accessible by managerial and political leaders.

Better use of data and evidence could enhance SLI in several ways:

- Providing councils with a simple self-assessment tool that they could use regularly to monitor their own performance;
- Giving councils a better understanding of the external improvement support they should access;
- Focussing SLI activities with councils, including CPCs, on the areas that require attention as well as a route to extracting and disseminating more learning from SLI activities and evolving the offer towards greater “sector led assurance”;
- Generating further evidence that could be used to demonstrate the impact of SLI.

If this concept is to be pursued further, however, it is important to consider three other points:

- First, people arguing in favour of more systematic use of data and evidence as a route to providing “sector led assurance”, are keen to distinguish it from previous externally driven initiatives such as Comprehensive Performance Assessment. The sector-led principle is key;
- Second, other organisations in the sector, such as CPFA, collect and hold relevant data. There is scope for a collaborative approach to this;
- Third, if “sector led assurance” is to have the potential impact its proponents envisage data and evidence must be available and presented in ways that are readily accessible to managerial and political leaders.

SLI and councils in challenging circumstances

An issue our interviewees were particularly keen to ensure is considered by the LGA in its thinking about how SLI can be enhanced is in relation to its impact on councils in challenging circumstances. We are aware that this issue is being addressed in the internal review of CPCs, but given the strength of feeling on this point among the people we spoke to, it is important to log in this report a number of high level reflections for the LGA to consider.

It is important to stress, as the vast majority of our interviewees did, that these points about how SLI could be enhanced are suggested in the context of enthusiasm for the approach and a recognition of the significant impact it can have, particularly in councils which are open to external challenge and lessons from elsewhere. Our interviewees’ keenness to explore this issue reflects the importance of the principle of SLI relating “a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole”.

There are two aspects to this issue. They are whether more could be done to:

- Encourage the small minority of councils which have minimal engagement with SLI to become more active;
- Enable SLI interventions to have more traction with councils in difficult circumstances.

These two aspects are seen as being linked because of a concern that a failure to embrace the ethos of SLI, particularly openness to constructive challenge and learning, is in itself an indicator of a council being at risk of poor performance.

Participation in SLI

Every English council participates in some SLI activity. Every council has, for example benefited from support on cyber security. The LGA data³, however, shows that the level of participation varies significantly. In 2017-18 and 2018-19 the ten councils which participated least in SLI received between three and five elements of SLI support, whereas the ten councils which participated the most received between 13 and 18 elements. A small minority of councils have not, to date, participated in a CPC.

The MoU with government includes an expectation that every council should receive a CPC and it is interesting to note that every council in the South West has done so. Drawing on our qualitative research, the LGA should consider what further action it could take to encourage increased participation in SLI activities including the possible benefits of:

- More unequivocal statements about its expectations of councils' participation in SLI;
- More effective communication of the case for SLI, the benefits of participation and the impact it can have, aimed at both political and officer audiences (we explored the communications challenge in more detail in an earlier section – Ownership);
- Using both political and member networks at national and regional levels to enable direct conversations with leading figures in non-participating councils including the LGA's political group offices, SOLACE, CIPFA and the other officer associations.

A number of interviewees also floated the idea that the Secretary of State could issue a statement making it clear that the government expects all councils to participate in SLI including CPCs.

The impact of the process

As our first report shows, the LGA's extensive evidence base demonstrates high levels of satisfaction with and take up of SLI and confidence within the sector that SLI is having a positive impact on council's effectiveness, improvement and innovation. All our interviewees supported the principle of SLI. Our stakeholder interviews, however, have identified concerns about the extent to which SLI getting the necessary traction in councils in difficult circumstances. The concerns we have heard relate to the robustness of the process, the strength of the recommendations and the rigour of follow-up action.

³ This data excludes peer challenges.

It is important to take three points into account in considering this issue.

First, many of the comments relate to the impact of CPCs. This reflects the point above about CPC being the element of SLI that our interviewees are most familiar with. The concerns are, however, relevant to the underlying ethos of SLI and the offer as a whole.

Second, many people point to the strengths of SLI as including its voluntary nature, the ability of councils to influence the focus of an SLI intervention and the people delivering it. Yet these factors are seen as potential weaknesses in the application of SLI in councils in difficulty.

Third, we are aware that there are almost always informal contacts between the LGA and councils in difficulty, often involving the relevant principal adviser and lead peer. These discussions are inevitably confidential, but the absence of any public reference to the support being given to some councils reinforces perceptions that SLI is not contributing in these cases.

It is clear from our work that the whole question of the impact of SLI in councils in challenging circumstances is one which the LGA should explore in thinking about how SLI could be enhanced. The LGA could usefully consider whether in these cases there would be benefits in adopting a more assertive approach in relation to:

- The type of SLI intervention(s) that may be appropriate, the focus of those interventions and the selection of the team to deliver it;
- The make-up of the team and its ability to craft recommendations in a way that is most likely to lead to improvement;
- Follow-up action and reporting.

We are aware that these issues are being explored in more detail in the LGA's internal review of CPC, but they are also relevant to the wider offer.

There is significant evidence that SLI interventions, including CPCs, are particularly impactful when a new leader is elected, or a new chief executive is appointed. The length of time it takes to arrange a CPC, for example, means that the opportunity may be lost. We are aware that the LGA has developed remote recovery and renewal panels to provide improvement support to councils in a coronavirus context. It may be that a similar model could be explored in these circumstances.

Further reflections for the future

In this section we set out some further reflections on ways in which SLI could be enhanced, including the impact of and response to Coronavirus.

Coronavirus

Six months on from when this work was commissioned councils are in the frontline of the response to coronavirus and the LGA is playing a vitally important role in supporting them to respond with the sector's support and improvement capacity focused on this task. We have been asked to consider the implications of the pandemic and the response to it for our reflections on the future of SLI.

First, it is clear that effective, resilient and innovative local councils are more important than ever. This reinforces the importance of SLI. It also means that it is essential that every council participates in SLI and that every council act on the advice and challenge that it receives as a result of its participation.

Second, this is a rapidly developing and changing context and looks set to be so for some time. This has at least two implications for SLI:

- It must be as responsive as possible to the changing and evolving needs of the sector, to expand into areas where councils have a varied and important role, working alongside partners. One such example relates to the need to address economic resilience, working closely with employers and LEPs to support local economies and ensuring an appropriate "place" response is taken;
- This is an area in which there is currently no "best" practice, rather extensive "emerging" practice. The high levels of support for the LGA's role in capturing and disseminating good practice mean that it is well-placed to disseminate this emerging practice. It also highlights the importance of capturing and disseminating learning from SLI interventions during this period.

Third, high quality political and community leadership will be critically important in supporting places, communities, residents and businesses over the coming months and years. The LGA's track record in designing and delivering leadership programmes with very high satisfaction levels suggest that it is well-placed to support senior politicians to develop new skills for changing times.

Finally, it is important to think about the ways in which SLI is delivered in the context of continued tough and disruptive social distancing. This reinforces the importance of thinking about an increased role for data and evidence in SLI and the potential for some lighter touch peer interventions and development programmes being delivered remotely including the proposed recovery and renewal panels which the LGA is currently developing.

Other issues

There are three further areas which we think the LGA should explore in seeking to enhance SLI. The LGA could usefully consider:

- What more could be done to capture evidence on the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation;

- How to mobilise the increasing levels of satisfaction with SLI among councillors to craft and communicate a string political narrative about the power, importance and impact of SLI;
- What value could be provided to the sector through a more consistent approach to capturing and disseminating learning for the sector as a whole from SLI interventions with individual councils that could provide greater “sector led assurance” for government and the public.

Annex A: Full list of sources

Source	Link
LGA Perceptions Survey	LGA Perception Survey 2012 LGA Perception Survey 2013 LGA Perception Survey 2014 LGA Perception Survey 2015 LGA Perception Survey 2016 LGA Perception Survey 2017 LGA Perception Survey 2019
Memorandum of Understand between MHCLG and LGA/IDeA: Year-end evaluations 2018-19	CPC peer review - initial feedback CPC peer review - impact survey National Graduate Development Programme Cohort 18 feedback survey National Graduate Development Programme impact survey 2018 Leadership Essentials - initial feedback Leadership Essentials - impact survey Next Generation - initial feedback Next Generation - impact survey Leadership Academy - initial feedback Leadership Academy - impact survey Housing Advisers – feedback survey Workforce - initial feedback
Memorandum of Understand between MHCLG and LGA/IDeA: Year-end evaluations 2019-20	NGDP - end of programme survey NGDP - impact survey Next Generation - impact survey Workforce - impact survey Housing Advisers – impact survey Leadership Academy - impact survey Leadership Essentials impact survey 2018-19
Productivity Experts	Productivity Experts case studies
Digital Workstream	Digital Experts Case studies Digital Transformation programme Digital Channel Shift programme Sector Analysis: Digital Tools
Behavioural Insights Programme	LGA Behavioural Insights Projects

Annex B: The qualitative research

Interviews were carried out with a sample of Chief Executives and Leaders of councils from across the country. This included individuals with varying levels of knowledge of the SLI offer as well as fortuitous conversations. In some cases, Shared Intelligence was approached by Chief Executives and Leaders upon hearing about the evaluation. The LGA's Innovation and Improvement Board was also involved in the evaluation, receiving updates on the fieldwork and contributing to the discussion.

Key research questions

1. What is the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation?

In addressing this question, we interrogated evidence of effectiveness and impact using the roles of councils set out in the current SLI MoU as a framework. We also explored evidence of impact in relation to the different SLI offers.

2. Does the SLI approach have the continued confidence and engagement of the sector and, as a result, the trust of the public?

This was a direct question as part of the research.

3. Has the SLI programme of support had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself?

In addressing these questions, we looked at evidence of the take-up of, satisfaction with and confidence in SLI as a whole and the different SLI offers (leadership development; challenge from peers; benchmarking performance; practical support; sharing and spreading good practice). We also explored the extent to which local government as a sector owns SLI and the principles that underpin it. The current arrangements for resourcing SLI were also considered.

4. Can the impact of SLI be further enhanced going forward and, if so, how and to what extent?

In addressing this question, we used the evidence collected in relation to the first three questions to inform discussion with key stakeholders. We explored the overall framework, including ownership within the sector and the roles of the LGA, MHCLG and other organisations, and the elements that currently constitute the SLI offer. We concluded with a set of reflections for the LGA to take forward its discussion with the sector on the future of SLI.

Interview questions – phase 1

- What are your personal experiences of being involved in SLI?
- What impact do you think sector led improvement should have on the effectiveness of local councils?
- How can sector led improvement maintain the confidence of the sector, key stakeholders and ultimately the public?
- What areas need to be addressed to deliver this?
- How can we ensure that sector led improvement is owned by local government?

Interview questions – phase 2

The principles of SLI

- Are the principles of SLI still valid? Do they need to be refined and, if so, how?

The robustness of the offer

- How can the sector be confident that the SLI offers are sufficiently robust to create the conditions in which councils are most likely to improve, including councils in challenging circumstances?
- How could greater use be made of data and evidence to support improvement? Should the idea of sector led assurance be explored?
- How could the sector as a whole benefit more from the learning generated by SLI activities?

Ownership of SLI

- How can the sector's ownership of SLI be maintained or strengthened?
- Should there be more opportunities for the sector to influence the programme building on the experience of the existing advisory groups?
- How could the way in which SLI is funded be used to maintain sector ownership of it?

Positioning of SLI

- How could the way in which the SLI offer and its impact are communicated strengthen the credibility of the process?
- What should government's interest in and contribution to improvement in local government be and how is that contribution best secured and communicated?
- How could the MoU be developed to add more value to the process?