

## Case study

November 2018

# The impact of sector-led improvement

Sector-led improvement is the approach to improvement in local government put in place by local authorities and the LGA. Peer challenge is a core element of the LGA's improvement offer and other bespoke forms of support are available to meet the particular needs of individual authorities.

In order to help demonstrate the impact of sector-led improvement the LGA commissioned Shared Intelligence (Si) to capture authorities' experience of the process in the words of the leaders and chief executives concerned.

Over the next few weeks details from interviews with the leaders and chief executives of 20 councils which have benefited from sector-led improvement will be available on the LGA website. The interviews will illustrate the impact of the process, highlight key elements of it and help share learning across the sector.

This short report summarises some of the key points made in the first tranche of interviews. It reports the views of leaders and chief executives on the use and impact of sector led improvement and their reflections on the process.

## 2. Some early stories, in the words of the leaders and chief executives concerned

### How councils have used sector-led improvement and the wider impact

‘Actually working with the sector doing improvement with us must be the way of making it (change) sustainable’

Will Tuckley, Chief Executive, Tower Hamlets

‘I think I’d probably say that it has had demonstrable impact on both the political and organisational structures of this council and therefore it is not a wishy-washy approach or process, it has teeth. And it has led to change.’

David Buckland, Executive Director, Stratford-on-Avon

‘And for me the proof is director’s talk about it. We sit in our area around there talking about the business of authority and the direction of travel and the peer review gets referenced. People have read it, people have understood it, it has helped. Its reinforced agendas we had, and its clarified agendas where we’ve needed to. So, you know, I’d be hard-pressed to say it was anything other than a wholly positive experience.’

Jan Britton, Chief Executive, Sandwell

‘It gave a chance to articulate thoughts, it gave a chance to talk to a group of people who were neutral, it provided the opportunity for feedback on issues. I mean it’s just an incredibly useful process.’

Cllr Tony Jefferson, Leader, Stratford-on-Avon

A vital aspect of assessing the impact of sector-led improvement is to understand what motivated the councils to seek the support in the first place and then to capture what has happened as a result.

It is clear from the councils we spoke to that they have sought sector-led improvement support at different ‘moments’ on their own individual improvement journeys. The context in which the support was commissioned varied significantly – some of the councils we visited have come through intense and difficult periods of intervention and/or significant change while others are on their own improvement journeys.

The stories we have heard about the motivation for commissioning sector-led improvement suggest three different but often overlapping scenarios:

- Firstly, to seek some sort of validation of their strategic direction of travel, their own diagnosis of the council’s strengths and weaknesses, and/or their overarching approach to a set of issues - what we might call the reality checking part of the process or as one chief executive described it ‘the show and tell’ approach;
- Secondly to seek a robust critique of where the gaps are, what they are missing and how they can move forward – what we might call strategic challenge;
- Thirdly to offer robust, experienced and practical support to help move a council on possibly alongside an intervention programme, or when dealing with a specific strategic challenge.

## **Value of the reality check**

A key theme from our first tranche of interviews is that the value of reality checking and validation should not be underestimated, perhaps particularly for councils which have emerged from a period of difficulty or intense change.

'It was quite sort of cathartic because the acknowledgement at the end of the week that they (peer challenge team) had heard and seen the scale and complexity of some of what we'd dealt with, and endorsed the manner in which we'd done it, was valuable'

Jan Britton, Chief Executive, Sandwell

'But I'd like to think that at a minimum what happens is having some external verification that gives you confidence that your judgements are reasonable is what will happen. ...I think the sense of external validation from people who understand how the sector works, in a way that's not dogmatic but is adding value, is a good thing to do.'

John Biggs, Mayor, Tower Hamlets

'Because there's nothing like those sorts of people (senior peers) .....saying to you, 'Actually you've got some really good stuff here.....And that's a huge boost to people who've focused on making sure that we progress and making sure that we get through...'

Will Tuckley, Chief Executive, Tower Hamlets

'So actually I think stepping back and kind of reflecting on the things we do well, and we've got a fantastic staff team here and it was good to have the opportunity to showcase what they're doing day in, day out. So I think that was really positive, so on a personal note I think it was just helpful to just have that.'

Antoinette Jackson, Chief Executive, Cambridge

'I think that perhaps one of the most valuable services we had in the early days, was the validation of the proposals that we were putting forward.'

Cllr John Williams, Leader, Taunton Deane

## **Added value of strategic challenge**

Chief Executives and Leaders are also clear about the robustness and value of the challenge aspects of peer challenges and other forms of support.

'It was quite brutal, but truthful and change was necessary'

Cllr Patrick Harley, former Leader, Dudley

'I was an enthusiast about the whole peer challenge process before we had it and it lived up to my expectations. It provided us with some really valuable insights'

Sarah Norman, Chief Executive, Dudley

'A really powerful learning tool in a relatively small space'

Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge

'They got under the skin of the place and they identified the issues. They identified that we were a good authority, we're doing well but really is that stretching enough for you and the kind of challenges that you've got?'

David Buckland, Executive Director, Stratford-on-Avon

'It certainly made me think and I found it a very, very worthwhile process.'

Cllr Tony Jefferson, Stratford-on-Avon

It is possible to group what our interviewees said about the value of sector led improvement can be around five or six key areas as follows:

- Challenging the longer-term vision and narrative of the council and place;  
'We had a clear council plan with clear priorities, what there wasn't was a clear vision for the borough that we shared with partners'

Sarah Norman, Chief Executive, Dudley

- Helping to clarify priorities;  
'It (the peer review) helped me to define that narrative and it helped me set the tone early on in that first year about where we were to really focus our efforts'

Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge

- Acting as a springboard for change and challenging the status quo;  
'The broader work the LGA does through peer work and through signposting and improvement just helps you get decisions made, helps you with leadership challenges and helps you have traction'

Penny James, Chief Executive, Taunton Deane and West Somerset

- Clarifying obstacles to progress and areas of strength;  
'Sometimes you cannot see the issues that are stopping you from moving forward. A peer review will throw up those obstacles and identify them and hopefully show ways of overcoming those obstacles'

Cllr Patrick Harley, former Leader, Dudley

- Offering an experienced view on complex/ knotty issues;  
'I mean one of the issues which must come in most and certainly came out here, it's the working relationship between officers and leader and cabinet and councillors. And that is something never to be overlooked.'

Cllr Tony Jefferson, Leader, Stratford

'I think what it did do was shine a light on how much we were doing on health scrutiny at the time, and actually identified that we needed some support'

David Buckland, Executive Director, Stratford

- Providing practical support  
'The beauty I suppose of the support being sector-led was that it was all really tangible'

Cllr Chris Read, Leader, Rotherham

## **Building maturity and confidence**

There is a powerful consensus among the leaders and chief executives we interviewed that one of the biggest impacts of sector-led improvement is how it grows the confidence of the whole council - staff and members. Confidence in understanding where strengths lie and getting on with the task (the validation part of the process), confidence in seeking help where needed and exposing vulnerability and confidence in being open to learning from outside the organisation.

“People don’t improve and systems don’t improve by just being told that they are doing badly. We’ve been able to get external validation about things that are going well. We’ve been able to use that to continue to motivate people and to continue to share the learning about what good practice looks like.”  
Sharon Kemp, Chief Executive, Rotherham

### 3. Reflections on the sector-led improvement process

When asked about the process of sector-led improvement our interviewees focussed on four aspects. These are:

- The input of local government peers;
- The need for formal vs. informal learning;
- The timing of sector-led improvement; and
- The value of the self-assessment process.

We say more about each of these aspects in the paragraphs below.

#### **The value of credible, well-matched peers**

‘Sector-led improvement was about peer supporting peers. It was people who had grounded and practical experience who were coming in to provide support and capacity in terms of moving intervention forward and delivering improvements.’

Sharon Kemp, Chief Executive, Rotherham

Perhaps the single most powerful feedback we have had during our interviews, and supported by other reviews of sector-led improvement models, has been the credibility and value of peers, who individuals and councils can respect and trust, carrying out the reviews. This use of peers is the central pillar lying at the heart of sector-led improvement. With no exception, all councils we spoke to recognise this and, for the most part, interviewees have said that the members of their peer team were ‘right’ for them.

Being ‘right’ for the council can be delineated into a more tangible set of skills, experience and seniority but also more intangible ‘chemistry’ between the peer team members and their council counterparts. It is the latter ‘chemistry’ which makes the input of the council chief executive and leader into the selection of the peer team critical.

‘I personally felt picking the right team, working with the LGA to get the right team was an important thing to do’

Jan Britton, Chief Executive, Sandwell

Interviewees agreed that this process was handled well and the one or two disappointments were due to unavoidable last-minute changes in team members.

The political ‘chemistry’ feels particularly important. As one chief executive said:

‘It is really important to me that I didn’t put a politician in the room that the leader of the council wasn’t going to respect their views’

Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge

Another leader said:

‘There’s a lot depends on striking up a relationship with the mentor...and if it feels like a chore then you’re not going to get the most out of it’

Chris Read, Leader, Rotherham

This political 'chemistry' was not necessarily restricted to party political factors and for those councils with large oppositions or no overall control, input from across the political spectrum was deemed crucial.

The importance of the peer 'matching' was summed up by one chief executive who said:  
'I wanted to have a chief executive that was leading the team that had the relevant skills set and experience...And I wanted a team around (chief executive) that had a skillset that would be curious, would be inquiring, and would be comfortable talking to us about things that they felt uncomfortable about in the organisation.'

Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge

### **The necessity of informal vs formal learning 'spaces'**

Emerging from our conversations, and perhaps linked to the credibility of the peer team and the mutual respect they by and large engender, has been a strong sense that the informal feedback and learning – whether through end of day conversations during the peer process, 'offline' catch ups or ongoing mentoring relationships – were as important learning spaces in the sector-led improvement process as any formal review and end of review reporting processes.

'Being able to have those conversations offline on a daily basis all added to my knowledge of what is going on in the organisation'

Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge

Linked to the theme of informal vs formal learning, the chief executive from Rotherham talked positively about a wide range of formal and informal sector-led improvement activities –peer reviews, mentoring with peer partners, short challenge sessions (or in her words 'peer support light') – they had experienced and emphasised the different strengths of each but equally the power of some combination of them. She was clear that the important issue for her was having the flexibility of the improvement support 'offer' and being absolutely clear on what the council was trying to achieve through commissioning the support.

This chief executive also said that:

'We have moved along the journey from an initial very broad temperature check to a more judicious use of sector-led improvement and then through greater confidence within the council it's become part of our DNA and way of working.'

Sharon Kemp, Chief Executive, Rotherham

Another chief executive also positively discussed the space for different types of improvement such as expert groups and networks.

The message we take from this is that while the peer challenge process (notably the corporate peer challenge) remains at the core of sector-led improvement, other aspects of the 'offer' - from informal networking to more specific expert challenges and peer reviews – are equally legitimate and valued.

### **Does timing matter?**

New leaders and chief executives see particular benefits in a peer challenge.

'I wanted to have the benefit of other peoples' perspectives on the organisation very early after I'd started in the organisation'

Andy Donald, Chief Executive, London Borough of Redbridge

'If you are a new council leader get the LGA in, it is absolutely invaluable'

Cllr Patrick Harley, former Leader, Dudley

Equally there is also a strong consensus that sector-led improvement should not be prompted by a crisis as that is too late. Rather that sector-led improvement (in some form) should be done regularly and often.

'I think one of the problems historically is that Rotherham had been isolated and had nothing to compare itself to....That was one of the many problems that took Rotherham to Jay and then Casey – because we didn't have anything to compare to, we weren't engaged with the rest of local government.'

Cllr Chris Read, Leader, Rotherham

Some we spoke to had chosen to have a peer challenge or some other sector-led improvement at particular points in the council's improvement journey for e.g. one council chief executive wanted a review 18 months after their appointment as a moment when they had ownership of where the council was but wanted to take stock, another chief executive felt the council was moving out of a tough period and wanted validation of their forward plan.

One leader told us,' the principle behind the peer challenge is that there's never a wrong time.....there's always something that needs development, that needs change.'

Cllr Steve Eling, Leader, Sandwell

### **Self-assessment matters**

All our interviewees highlighted the importance and value of the self-assessment process, both as a contribution to the peer review and as a useful exercise in its own right.

'I think the self-assessment I would say is one of the most useful parts of the process because it makes you as an organisation take stock and say, 'well what is our story at this point in time?'

Antoinette Jackson, Chief Executive, Cambridge

Some of your closest colleagues, both politically and professionally have, in a couple of cases, quite different perspectives on things where maybe the assumption was we all shared a view. That was quite an interesting and valuable process'

Jan Britton, Chief Executive, Sandwell

'I think it articulated what we are trying to do as a council, the kinds of issues that we're facing. So from that perspective it [the self-assessment] was very helpful, in itself it was a bit of teamwork across the organisation, as well as laying out very clearly, I think, what we are about as a council'

David Buckland, Executive Director, Stratford



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