

Sector-led improvement in practice

Case studies



Sector-led improvement involves local authorities leading the way to make sure they improve their services and maintain high standards. Transparent performance reporting, ongoing self-assessment, peer challenge and sharing best practice are all part of sector-led improvement.

The Local Government Association (LGA) supports sector-led improvement with a number of services, from peer mentoring, to self-assessment tools, help with scrutiny, peer challenge with senior officers or councillors from other councils, and the popular LGA Leadership Academy.

There's also an online knowledge hub where authorities can share knowledge and best practice, and LG Inform – an online data and benchmarking service.

Particular issues and challenges can arise in children's and adult social services and as a consequence, enhanced sector-led improvement programmes are being developed in partnership with others.

In children's services this work is led by the national Children's Improvement Board (CIB) which is a partnership board involving the LGA, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), and SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives), supported by the Department for Education (DfE).

In adult social services this work is led by the Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care Board (TEASC) which is a partnership board including representatives from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), the LGA, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), the Department of Health (DH), Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), SOLACE and the Think Local Act Personal partnership.

This publication illustrates how some councils are approaching this agenda and captures their feedback about some of the support being made available.

For more information on these offers of support, see the LGA guide 'Sector-led improvement in local government' and www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement

Foreword

Sector-led improvement is gaining momentum.

Despite the continuing pressure on resources it is clear from these case studies that councils are embracing sector-led improvement with real commitment. Councils are investing in political leadership; finding new ways of engaging local people and communities; inviting challenge from peers; sharing good practice and utilising comparative data as a driver for improvement.

Not only that but the enthusiasm of leaders and senior officers is palpable and the diversity of approaches evidenced in this publication is really refreshing and encouraging.

Of course I am also pleased to read about the real benefit that councils have found in the support we are providing but more important than that I want to encourage you to take a few minutes to read these stories and make sure that you and your council are also benefiting from the support on offer.



Councillor Peter Fleming
Chairman
LGA Improvement Board

Supporting effective political leadership

Effective political and officer leadership is key to sustained improvement.

The LGA provides a range of development support for political leaders, and more than 1,000 councillors received leadership support of some kind in 2011/12.

“The Leadership Academy helped me gain a greater understanding and develop my local political leadership skills. The exposure to councillors from very diverse backgrounds and authorities was priceless.”

**Councillor Mehboob Khan, Leader,
Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council**



Case study: Staffordshire County Council

After 17 years as a county councillor, Councillor Philip Atkins decided he needed to stop resting on his laurels and be 'in it to win it' to make changes.

As leader of the opposition at Staffordshire County Council, he approached the LGA for support and was provided with a mentor in the shape of Councillor David Finch, a member of the cabinet of Essex County Council. Philip found the support he gained from David invaluable. "He made me realise I needed to up my game and support the Conservative group to up theirs too," he says.

With a new momentum, Philip changed his approach to politics. He booked onto an LGA Leadership Academy and found it invaluable in preparing him to take over as Leader of the council, as he subsequently did in the 2009 elections.

"It was fantastic support – the speakers, the networking, learning about politics and how it worked around the country, and being given the tools to do some good work was really invaluable," said Philip.

He said the Leadership Academy led to important pieces of work within the council and helped him develop the mantra "borrow with pride, lend with humility".

"By building up a network of colleagues around the country, I was able to see the value of tapping into the expertise of others," he said.

Philip is a great advocate of the Leadership Academy and subsequently booked all members of his cabinet and key scrutiny chairmen onto it. "There's so much to gain that I had to ensure my colleagues were benefiting from it as I was," he said.

Once in place as Leader, Philip received LGA support centred around change of control and has had further one-to-one mentoring.

"One of the things this mentoring did was teach me the importance of communication," says Philip. "You may have one thing to communicate with a variety of audiences but you need to communicate that message in different ways, ways which are suitable to the people you are communicating with."

This concept is applied across the council now, he says, from changing libraries into community hubs to integrating social services with health.

Philip urges councillors to sign up for whatever support they can get and to never rest on their laurels but get support every step of the way in a bid to ensure they strive for constant improvement.

Case study: Forest Heath District Council

Councillor James Waters has been Leader of Forest Heath District Council since May 2011.

And in his first year in office he has been supported by a package of help from the LGA which has enabled him to tap into the expertise of other councils while improving his own.

His first year in office saw a new constitution for cabinet, and the appointment of a joint chief executive with a neighbouring authority.

First port of call as a new leader was the LGA's Leadership Academy where James was able to call on the expertise of others, and share his own experiences too.

He says: "A key benefit of the Leadership Academy was the opportunity to network with other senior members from a variety of authorities, with different political make up and culture. Other councillors were helpful as sounding boards on the plans and ideas on how to take the Forest Heath members forward with the shared service and cabinet proposals."

"And by sharing my own experiences, I was able to assist others with their challenges which reassured me that I had a good understanding of the leader's role in local government."

James says the academy also helped because it highlighted the past, present and future for local government.

Mentoring for James was provided by LGA Vice Chairman and Conservative Group Chair Gary Porter.

"The mentoring empowered me to realise my decision and drive to move to a new model would result in the benefits required by the authority and the shared services agenda," says James.

It also facilitated a meeting with St Edmundsbury council to discuss shared services.

"This clarified with members what to expect of shared services and their role and helped them to become more receptive and has resulted in members becoming verbally and visually supportive of the shared service agenda."

"Members were able to identify the potential benefits and disadvantages of leadership models and having an external person to challenge existing thinking helped facilitate the change to the new cabinet and leader model at Forest Heath in a short time scale. This will help both authorities to work more effectively as the decision making process is similar, reducing the time to take decisions."

When it came to changing the constitution of the cabinet, Forest Heath used the LGA to look at comparative information and examples of constitutions from around the country and received advice on engaging with members.

The LGA was also able to support the appointment of the joint Chief Executive of Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury councils by giving them an insight into how shared chief executive roles work in other areas.

What's on offer?

The LGA is committed to continuing to provide development support for political leaders.

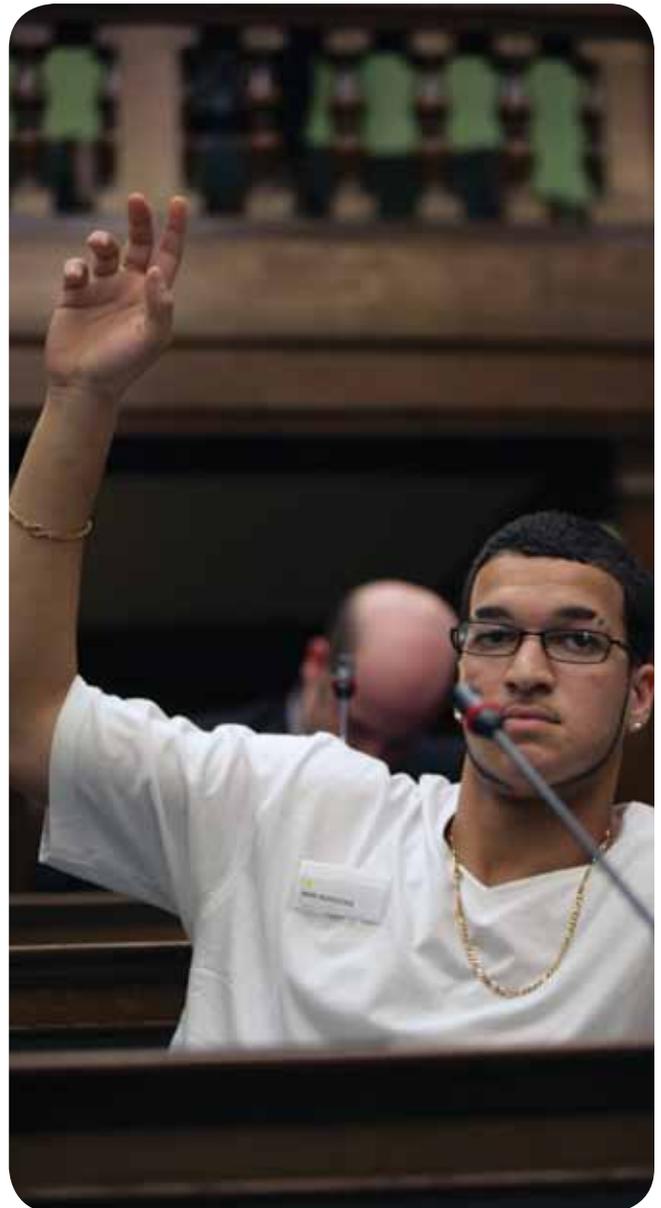
Each council is offered one subsidised place on one of the main leadership programmes (Leadership Academy or Leeds Castle) over each of the next three years.

- **Leadership Academy** – three two-day modules to help leading councillors learn from experts in the field and one another.
- **Leeds Castle** programme – an intensive 10 day leadership programme for council leaders and chief executives which provides a deeper understanding of the link between leadership, council success and locality.

This offer was taken up by 198 councils in the last financial year.

We also run the **Next Generation** programme – this prestigious political leadership programme for ambitious councilors has been developed within party tradition and with party political experts, creating an unparalleled political development opportunity for participants and enabling them to rise to their own current and future political challenges.

The popular Leadership Academy is held throughout the year, and other leadership programmes focus on adults' and children's services.



Strengthened local accountability

Councils already make extensive efforts to engage with their local residents. Exactly how they go about strengthening local accountability varies from place-to-place.

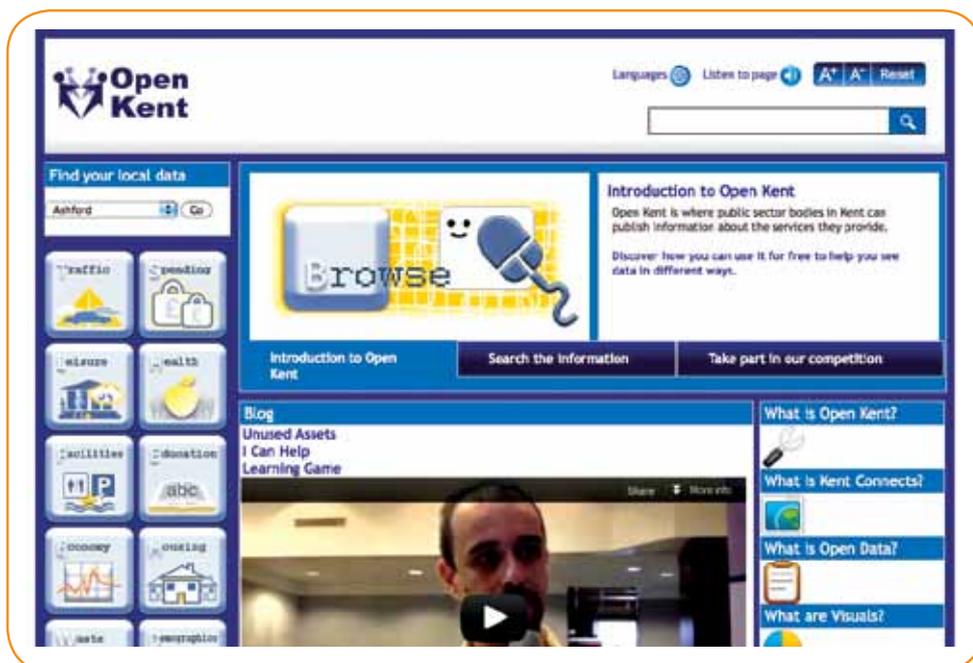
Case study: Kent County Council

In Kent, all the local authorities across the county plus the Fire and Rescue and Police Authorities have created 'Open Kent' which provides a single point of access for residents to data and information about local services.

'Open Kent' carried out a survey in 2011 to ask citizens about the usefulness of open data. Over 80 per cent advised that local public services should provide tools that make it easier for citizens without technical expertise to look inside open datasets.

Kent is currently reviewing 'Open Kent' to ensure the way data is organised by themes and visualisation tools helps to make it easier to understand and use.

Kent County Council encourages the community to make use of the data and tools through helpful guidance notes and online competitions. Kent County Council will be engaging with members of the public to inform the data that is published and explore other ways to present data through 'Open Kent'. See www.openkent.org.uk



Case study: Warrington Council

During 2011/12 Warrington Council introduced a magazine-style quarterly performance report, alongside the more traditional performance reports.

The intention was to turn what can be lengthy, detailed reports, into a document that was short, contained real-life stories and key facts, and was therefore more interesting and accessible to officers, councillors and the public.

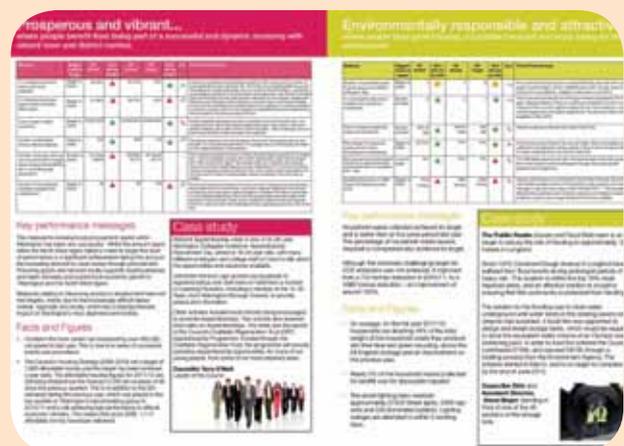
In addition it is hoped that in time a more accessible report will enable a wider group of individuals to engage with how well the council is delivering its services and in turn that this will increase the level of local challenge and accountability.

The reports have been well received. Overview and scrutiny councillors in particular much prefer this style of report and now use these exclusively at their meetings.

The council's communications team have also used some of the case studies in press releases to coincide with the reporting cycle.

The reports are available on the council's website (http://www.warrington.gov.uk/home/your_council/Publications/CouncilStrategy/) and the plan is to further develop them during 2012/13 so that they become more interactive and provide links to related information on the Council and other partners websites.

Councillor Hitesh Patel, executive lead member for performance, said: "Warrington takes performance seriously; we want to ensure we deliver on our pledges to the community. We have made a clear commitment to our residents to be open and transparent; and it is important that we enable them to challenge us by providing the right kind of information. These reports are one of the ways that we are doing so."



Case study: Newcastle City Council

Let's talk Newcastle is Newcastle City Council's way of engaging and involving local people in conversations about the difficult decisions it is taking about the council and the city. This frank approach to sharing information and listening to views and opinions is a key part of how Newcastle City Council does business.

'Let's Talk Newcastle' is a conversation not just about our public services – but about the type of community and the type of city we want to be in the future.

**Councillor Nick Forbes, Leader,
Newcastle City Council**

The let's talk approach, launched in July 2011, requires the council to work harder to make complex financial and policy issues easier to understand for everyone. By doing this we can reach out to many more people, improving their understanding of the issues, and involving them in meaningful conversations about how the council should shape and deliver its budget and its priorities.

Since it was launched, the let's talk Newcastle conversation has involved over 8,000 people, and their views helped to shape our 2012 budget proposals which were approved in March this year, as well as our long term planning for the future. It has helped the council understand the different level of priority people place on policies and services, and what tolerance people might have for lower levels of service or increased fees and charges. It has also helped the council understand more about the things which people value most and want to protect against budget cuts.

It has provided a better understanding of the appetite of citizens and communities to play a bigger role themselves in order to preserve valued services which might otherwise be at risk. And it has given local people a strong voice that policy makers cannot fail to hear.

A real benefit of the let's talk approach is that it enables a genuine two way dialogue which promotes a wider understanding of council services. As a result, the quality of the feedback people are able to give the council is much higher than that generated by traditional surveys. Questionnaire-based approaches, generally used by councils and other organisations, have produced very consistent sets of priorities, generally reflecting people's "doorstep priorities" - anti-social behaviour, road and pavement maintenance, litter and dog-fouling. The active engagement of let's talk allowed people to become more fully informed about council services.

With enhanced understanding, many more people prioritised less immediately visible, but essential services, such as care for vulnerable adults and ensuring a good start in life for children.

See <http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/your-council/community-engagement>

Local accounts

As part of the new approach to sector-led improvement in adult social care most councils have now published their first 'Local Accounts', a regular self-assessment setting out progress against priorities. Local accounts have the potential to become a key engagement and accountability mechanism to the public and people who use services. They can also provide a basis for self-improvement activity locally.

Though discretionary, all regions are supporting councils in producing local accounts. Some regions are, in addition, providing additional support in terms of analysis and the development of good practice guidance.

In the East of England, most local accounts have been through a peer review process with feedback provided on how these can be improved upon prior to publication. The region intends to go through a second stage of peer review to look at accessibility, outcomes, user experience, improvement journey and the extent to which the local account has been consumer focused. The learning from this will be shared with other regions.

Councils in the West Midlands have agreed to collaborate on the reviewing of local accounts in order to identify examples of good practice to share as well as concerns and deficiencies and to provide confidential feedback to individual councils on their local account. The review will look at key aspects such as accessibility to the public, a focus on outcomes for people and focus on user experience. Once again, it is anticipated that the findings will be shared with other local authorities.

The Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care Board will commission an evaluation of local accounts, building on regional work to date.

What's on offer?

- Stronger online guidance and an updated tool to help councils assess performance against key priorities.
- Support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny to make more effective use of scrutiny as a key tool for challenging performance locally.

www.cfps.org.uk

Challenge from peers

We know that challenge from our own peers is a proven tool for improvement.

“Peer challenges are no soft option. They offer honest appraisal of organisational effectiveness. What’s more the best way to learn how to improve your own organisation is to spend a week looking in-depth at other organisations trying to do similar things in very different places. This is why I found the week in Cornwall so rewarding. Practice-based learning that contributes to the improvement of another council - all in all I think it is time very well spent.”

**Barry Quirk, Chief Executive,
London Borough of Lewisham**

“The peer challenge process is a vital part of the sector-led approach to improvement that the government is supporting. It enables local authorities to learn from each other in a supportive but structured way, focusing on what works best for their areas and providing a real opportunity for forward-looking reflection. I’d encourage colleagues in national and local government to support the process and get involved if approached by the LGA to do so. It’s a fantastic opportunity to contribute to improvement in a local area and learn a lot at the same time.”

**Patrick White, Director, Local Government
Policy, Department for Communities and
Local Government**

Case study: Cornwall Council

One of the first batch of corporate peer challenges was in Cornwall.

Cornwall have had a practice over the last three years of using peer challenge extensively, in areas like fire, community safety, planning, children's services and adult services to provide an external perspective on the progress they have made.

The recent adult social care peer challenge was part of the process created by the sector-led Adult Social Care Towards Excellence Board to sign off progress of councils previously rated 'adequate' by CQC.

The peer challenge team was able to clarify that transformation was well underway and well managed with significant progress made. And they also gave Cornwall recommendations on what they could do even better including creating a multi-partnership commissioning strategy to shape integration and care closer to home across Cornwall and working closer with partners on a strategic approach to personalisation, prevention and wellbeing.

Explaining why Cornwall quickly took up the LGA's offer of a "corporate" peer challenge Chief Executive Kevin Lavery said: "We think we have coped well with the financial pressures but wanted to know how well we have done and what more we could do. The corporate challenge is a big part of this picture – giving us a broader view of the whole organisation at this stage."

"It was useful to have a team who were well-respected in the field."

"We did not want the review to just look backwards. Our wishes for the peer challenge were that there would be some challenge around our future plans and whether they were right or not."

"It was about support."

Kevin, and Alec Robertson, Leader of the council, say the peer review gave them an opportunity to look hard at the service and to be more honest than they would have been under the old inspection regime.

"The challenge wasn't just holding up a mirror. We received expert advice on our issues. The sessions with partners in particular were really good. You need someone external to the authority to really do this and the peer team did it well," said Alec.

"Peer challenge is not a big stick to beat authorities with. It's helpful, challenging and made us take a fresh look at our future plans and provided clear support to our future improvement plans."

Case study: London Borough of Sutton

The peer challenge in the London Borough of Sutton focused on their future strategy – to deliver a ‘smarter council’.

Sutton had been looking at a new model for the authority and timed the four day peer challenge to test their draft plan.

“It was important for us to have our plan challenged externally and to analyse what was realistic and whether it was deliverable,” said Chief Executive Niall Bolger.

A peer challenge team, which included council colleagues from North East Lincolnshire, Milton Keynes and Eastleigh, took a forensic look at the planned future strategy for Sutton.

“The team was excellent and really put our ideas under the microscope. Staff felt they could be honest and frank with the challenge team and they also talked to partners, other agencies and neighbouring councils. It was very thorough and they used a variety of techniques in their examination” said Niall.

The peer challenge recommended greater focus on economic development and housing need, whilst other areas of the plan were affirmed as being appropriate and deliverable.

“It was a very valuable experience and timing it for a stage when we were ready to test our strategy was important,” said Niall.

The report from the peer challenge went to the Executive and is now in the public domain.

“It’s important to us to be open and honest with our communities and that is part of the ethos of the organisation. By doing this we’re demonstrating that we’re taking performance improvement seriously; we’re being proactive.”

Niall says a peer challenge is an important tool for councils.

“It’s not a replacement at all for any of the inspection regimes, but a way to help us look in more depth at our plans and to see it through the eyes of others,” he said.

Leader of the council, Councillor Ruth Dombey added:

“The peer challenge was a very useful initiative and gave us the opportunity to review our progress. Having our peers look at our plans for the future from a different perspective challenged our assumptions in a way that will improve the way we run the council.”

Case study: West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service was one of the fire authorities who volunteered to pilot the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA) and LGA Operational Assessment and fire peer challenge.

And as a result, it has fostered an eagerness to look at what can be changed, rather than showcasing what's good.

Simon Pilling, Chief Fire Officer at West Yorkshire, says: "The previous CPA/CAA arrangement tended to make us focus on showcasing what was good about an authority and maybe hide what was not – it was a bit like a beauty contest. Sector-led improvement is more about looking at what we provide in a more critical way, and looking at where we can improve."

Roy Wilsher, Chief Fire Officer of Hertfordshire and Director of Operations for the Chief Fire Officers Association, led the peer team for the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue peer challenge.

"Having someone with recognised credibility meant West Yorks was prepared to be open and honest," says Simon, who says having the right team for a peer challenge is vital.

Being involved in the pilot meant that it was necessary for West Yorks to be made subject to a broad peer challenge in order to assist the process and test the new framework, however Simon believes focusing in on particular areas would be more beneficial following the self-assessment.

"This is about looking for possible weaknesses and areas of development and bringing them out in the open for the peer challenge and accepting advice from a credible critical friend," he says. "There's absolutely no problem in the challenge team taking a quick look at other areas that are viewed positively by the authority however maximum value would be achieved by allowing and enabling the team to assist and support us via a more concentrated in-depth study of areas that have already been identified as potential areas of improvement through the self-assessment."

"We had an excellent challenge team who were very professional and identified a range of potential issues and therefore we feel it was a very useful exercise. We were then able to look at these in more depth after the peer challenge and feed these into our improvement plan."

As a result West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service now have a range of key actions that have come from taking part in the peer challenge together with milestones set against them.

"We got a great deal out of this and I would urge other fire authorities to use it," says Simon. "But they must be prepared to look at themselves critically. Self-assessment should be about open and honest internal challenge that can then be fed into the peer challenge team who can focus on particular areas. Trust is vital, which is where the careful choice of the peer challenge team comes in."

West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service has published the peer challenge report publicly on its website – see www.westyorksfire.gov.uk

“What is very important I think is that we recognise that living in the incredibly challenging times that we are, we need to ensure that local government has the capacity, particularly corporate capacity, to deliver change but also you need that leadership both at a political and managerial level to ensure that change is effective and happens. That is why it is very important that this is assessed in any peer challenge.”

**Councillor Roger Phillips, Leader,
Hertfordshire County Council**

“The flexibility of the approach was ideal for us. It enabled us to commission the peer challenge at a time that suited us and to design it around our key challenges. The peer challenge was very well tailored to our needs and a highly experienced and credible peer team were brought together. It has proved immensely valuable for us and we thoroughly commend the approach”.

**Councillor John Kent, Leader,
Thurrock Council**

What's on offer?

- At no direct cost, a “corporate” peer challenge for every council over the three years from September 2011.
- At no direct cost, a fire peer challenge for every fire authority.
- At no direct cost, up to five days of member peer support for all councils undergoing a change of control.
- In children’s services, an opportunity for councils to receive challenge on their performance from their peers in other councils.
- At no direct cost a children’s safeguarding peer review - the offer is open to all councils but is prioritised for those where it forms part of an agreed package of targeted or early support.
- A subsidised peer challenge for each of the remaining councils rated “adequate” for adult services under the previous CQC assessment regime.

The LGA has spoken to more than 100 councils interested in “corporate” peer challenge, and 24 councils took part in one in 2011/12 and a further 70 have one booked or are discussing taking it forward. Feedback from the sector has been extremely positive about the new approach, in particular the flexibility over timing, the tailored and forward looking focus, and the high-quality of the peer teams.

More than 30 projects were run to support councils where there was likely to be a change of control following local elections, and 97 peer challenges were delivered in total in 2011/12, focusing on corporate, adults, safeguarding children and planning.

There have been 26 children's safeguarding peer reviews, three adults' peer challenges, and all councils are expected to have been engaged in children's peer challenge by the end of 2012.

The LGA has also worked in partnership with the Chief Fire Officers Association to develop a new offer for fire and rescue services – see case study on page 15.



Comparable performance data

Being able to compare performance with other councils and areas is an important driver for improvement.

Case study: London Borough of Wandsworth

Transparency is the name of the game for Wandsworth council. Chief Executive Paul Martin believes being open and making comparisons with other councils drives improvement and motivates officers and members to strive to do better, continuously.

As a result, Wandsworth is a very open council. It has its own Open Council area of the website where the public can check how it's doing at any given time and it puts a great emphasis on communicating, so that if Wandsworth isn't top of the game in a given area residents know why.

Satisfaction with services is high. In 2011, 87 per cent of Wandsworth residents were fairly or very satisfied with the way the council was run.

"We think that what drives councils to high levels of performance is a natural and innate interest in competition. We think it's very important that everyone in our organisation is aware of what we're achieving and how that compares to other councils, and we want residents to know that too. We want people to look at us and compare and hold services to account."



Wandsworth isn't hiding anything either. The performance indicators it publishes on its website show the bad as well as the good.

"We throw the doors open and invite people to take a look," says Paul. "And that helps to encourage debate and makes the conversation richer. It spurs a constant drive for improvement which is something the old inspection regime didn't necessarily do."

"Where things aren't looking rosy, we explain why. For example, our recycling performance in Wandsworth is lower than some areas. We explain why this is, and how we have achieved zero municipal waste to landfill despite having a lower recycling performance. Other councils should follow suit," says Paul.

The LGA's data service, LG Inform, is being developed to help councils do just that (see page 20).

See Wandsworth's Open Council website at: www.wandsworth.gov.uk/opencouncil

“LGInform is an invaluable resource, covering performance data across the spectrum of council and partner services which presents in a way that is fantastically useful for members whether they be ward councillors, scrutinisers or executive members. The platform is easy to use, flexible and yet has the depth to be a useful analytical tool.”

Councillor Tim Cheetham, Cabinet Spokesperson for Children, Young People and Families, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

“I have only just found out about this, and registered to use it (which was straight forward and free!) and at first sight, I was immediately impressed by the look of the tool and the information it contained! I think it will prove to be a powerful and useful source of information and I look forward to the finished version”.

Councillor Andrew Leadbetter, Workforce, Performance and Communications, Devon County Council

“Oxford City Council is committed to using LG Inform as a tool for all managers to use to access and share data on comparative cost and performance as part of its Performance Improvement Framework. This framework has a target of ensuring all services have access to and use high-quality benchmarking data by the end of 2013/14. The proposed functionality and development roadmap for LG Inform fit with Oxford’s vision of empowering managers to develop their own understanding and benchmarking networks.

Oxford has been happy to support the LGA in the future development of LG Inform to ensure it becomes a practical tool that managers, members and the public can use to gain a wider view on performance and cost, and will seek to establish links with its own performance management software to automate the process of updating data.”

Neil Lawrence, Performance Improvement Manager, Oxford City Council

“My personal use of LG Inform is in mining for data for bespoke analyses where a cross-sector picture provides useful context. LG Inform functions well as a one-stop-shop for government-held data at a local authority level, and as analysis tools are added will serve a greater purpose for participants. I feel that LG Inform in its current state does offer the best available resource for local authority benchmarking, and this should be commended at a time where performance data is becoming an increasingly valuable commodity.”

Dave Foley, Policy and Performance Officer, Hampshire County Council

What's on offer?

LG Inform – a new easy-to-use data service for councils providing, at no cost, a single point of access to a wide range of contextual, financial and performance data. This creates the ability to share and compare performance information between councils and to manipulate the data and create a range of score cards and reports. It is a tool for lead members, directors, performance managers and those involved in scrutiny.

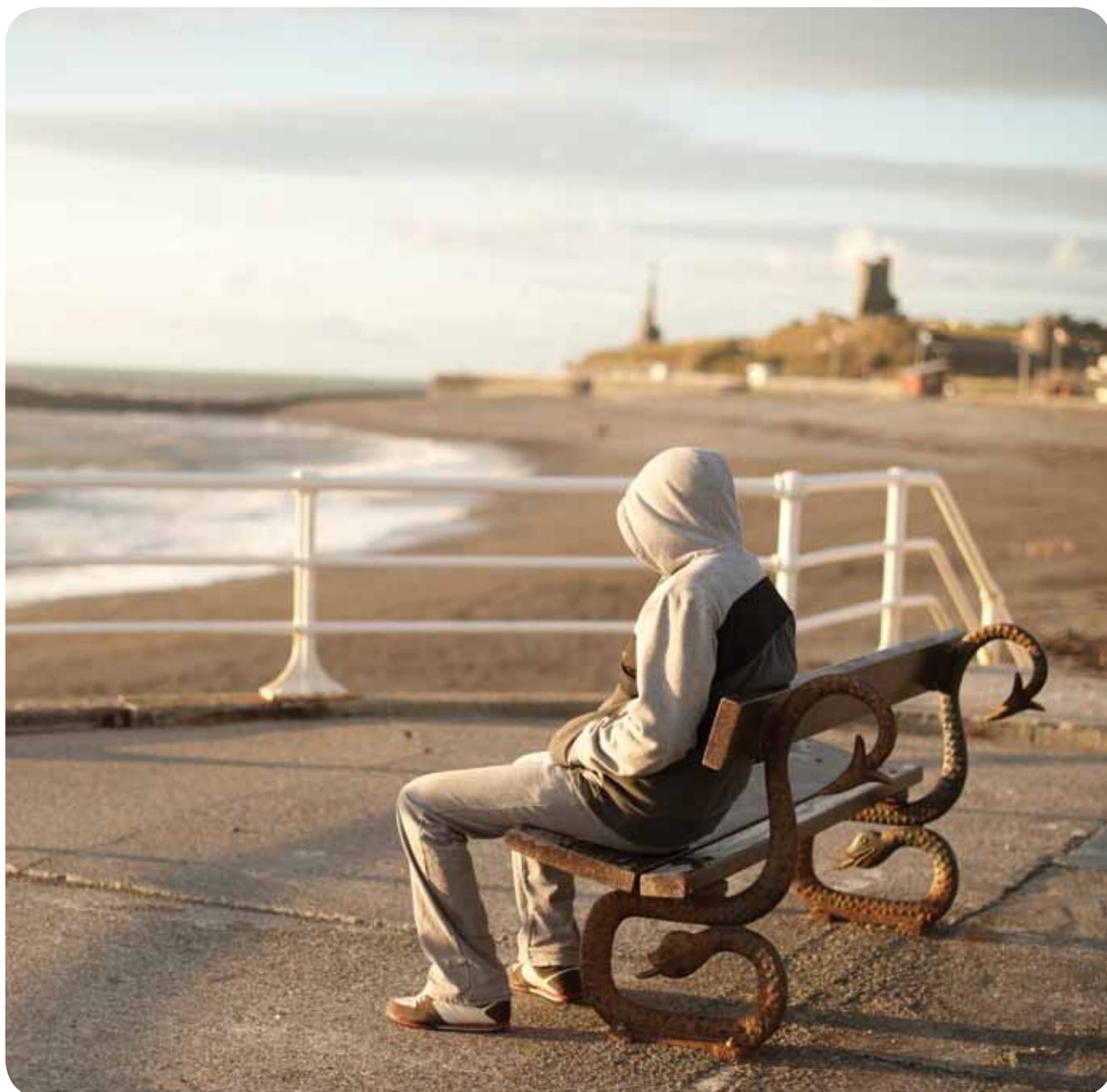
LG Inform will include a suite of common data for children's services developed through CIB and offer comparative data on key outcome areas and productivity in adult social care, developed through TEASC.

Over 300 councils (85 per cent of councils) have already started to use LG Inform with over 1400 registered users.

Following the launch of the next version of the service in autumn 2012, LG Inform will become open to the public. This will allow councils to write performance reports in LG Inform that they can publish on their website, or simply direct their residents to data for their authority in LG Inform.

For more information on LG Inform, see www.local.gov.uk/about-lginform

Support when facing particular challenges



Case study: Copeland Borough Council

Three years ago, Copeland Borough Council was an organisation that was keen to change. The then interim chief executive developed a programme of work with the LGA which the council has continued to further develop and commit to over time.

The constitution needed modernising, it was time to reprioritise the council's goals and delivery through a new council plan, staff needed be involved and engaged in the organisation's development, and services across the council needed to be reviewed. And all of this needed to happen within the context of severe and deep cuts to council budgets.

The LGA and North West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership offered Copeland a dedicated package of support and guidance.

An officer was seconded to support the delivery of an improvement plan, two political peers were assigned to the borough to work with the council and the two main political parties, and support was given to the senior management team and other officers and members to help their development. A 'Choosing to Change' board was set up which provided strategic direction and support utilising external and internal expertise.

The result meant change for Copeland... and the beginning of a journey of continual improvement which has seen the organisation move from needing support to being a case study for best practice.

Copeland's chief executive, Paul Walker and the Leader, Elaine Woodburn say that being able to learn from others was invaluable.

"The support helped us focus and move forward and provided a reference for our work. It helped us shape our new top team and improve cross-party working to find a way to work well together. It made us develop and improve our scrutiny arrangements. It really was invaluable."

So valuable, that Paul says they will continue to work with the LGA to support learning and improvement.

"One of the next things I'm keen to address is communication and developing the reputation of the council and the borough as a whole, together with our work on internal communications and our relationship with the media. We will work with the LGA to look at who is doing it well, what lessons we can learn from that and what we can achieve with the resources available."

"We're a relatively small local authority with limited resources but we don't let this temper our ambitions to deliver improved services for the people of the borough and to keep moving forward."

Learning is a key theme for Copeland, as Elaine says. "We've learned a lot along the way and we didn't get it all right, but we are proud of our achievements over the past two years and are looking forward to further success as an organisation."

"Winning the Local Government Chronicle's 2012 award for Corporate Governance, was a fantastic achievement for the council and one of which I am very proud."

Case study: Wokingham Borough Council

Children's services at Wokingham Borough Council were rated inadequate in late 2008 – which came as a shock to the council, both officers and councillors, not only in children's services, but across the organisation. It was in children's safeguarding that the problems were discovered following an Ofsted inspection. This of course meant that the whole of children's services was rated inadequate despite the fact that Wokingham has one of the best records in education achievement in the country.

It was decided to make a change to the Executive member for children's services as part of the recovery plan and Councillor Rob Stanton took the post but soon found himself facing a steep learning curve.

“It was a shock,” says Rob. “We didn't see that rating coming and we needed to act fast as we faced all sorts of pressure from the Department of Education and Ofsted as well as the local media who were unrelenting in their critical opinion. It's a very difficult challenge and we needed help.

We needed to set up an improvement board. Under the chairmanship of the Chief Executive of East Sussex County Council, with input from Marianne Abley of the LGA who steered me in the right direction, we were able to set the board up.

It was very clear that some of our senior officers were not in a good place to resolve this problem and a number of them resigned. Positively that allowed us to recruit a new senior team including a new director of children's services, but there was a long gap in service of senior staff.

For a newly appointed lead member knowledge is the key need and the support of others was essential. I had a lot of support from the Lead Member of East Sussex and the LGA, but little else and if ever it illustrates the need for the sector to work together as we are now developing, this is it.

What Cheryl Miller (Chair of the Improvement Board) brought was a huge amount of knowledge. She knew children's services well and she could help us to understand the complexities. Cheryl brought a lot of ideas.

I was able to get an early berth to the Leadership Academy weekend seminars run at Warwick University by the LGA which was excellent. The quality was top class and that was a universal opinion amongst everyone who attended. All new children's services lead members should attend it.”

Networking at the Leadership Academy proved invaluable and the networks formed over the two weekends of the course have been maintained, with councillors still supporting one another. A great benefit of the networking was realising that other councils had gone through, or were going through, similar situations to Wokingham.

“One very important relationship was to make sure the Executive (cabinet in some authorities) was fully engaged and behind me and that I was open and honest with them at the risks involved. I have to say that the Executive were excellent in their level of support both in finance and time. I felt supported, and that’s important as being the lead member in such a problem is a lonely job.”

As well as the change in executive member, key changes were made to staff, support was rallied from other councillors and, just as importantly, from schools and social workers and other members of staff.

Another important step was learning to manage the media – there was a lot of bad press about the judgement, but making the media realise the council was now working to turn things around and it was about children’s futures rather than politics was important.

“On reflection the missing ingredient was the support of other local authorities. While East Sussex was the exception, few other councils came to our rescue. It’s very clear to me that we need sector-led improvement and had that been in place at the time I am certain we would have found recovery easier and certainly timelier. It’s too early to say sector-led improvement will work, but I think it will as long as all councils are open and honest with each other.

The other major question is how it gets this bad before a council gets intervention. Why do we not see it coming and prevent it?

I am of the opinion that sector-led improvement will pick up on warning signs that things are going wrong sooner and be able to help our colleague council before it falls into an Ofsted category.

We were a good council, with good members, but we did not pick up on the signs of major problems early enough. We had all the data but failed to recognise it.

With an Ofsted inspection regime, you’re told things have gone wrong, it doesn’t necessarily pick up on when things are starting to go wrong. With sector-led improvement, you can pick up signs much earlier, and learn from others.

Sector-led improvement brings with it ongoing auditing which is what it should all be about and as a councillor I’d much rather be told by my colleagues that things can be done differently, than have an Ofsted inspector tell me I’ve done it wrong.

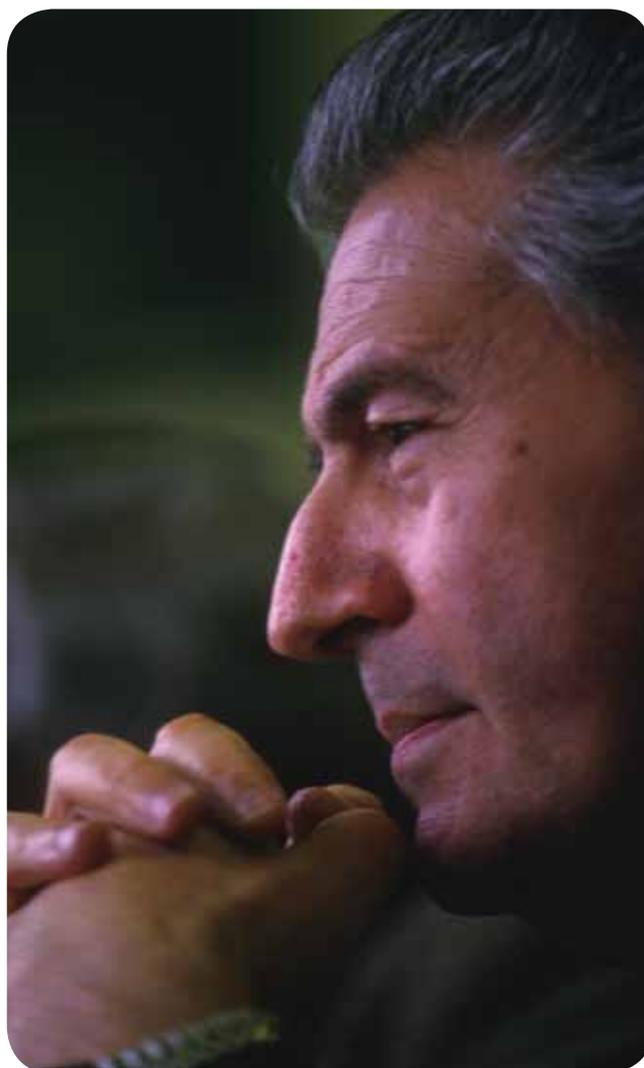
Seeing people as critical friends and being willing to listen to their suggestions is key but there must be trust and confidentiality. Without it, sector-led improvement won’t work.

But it must be made to work as it is all about putting right the problem before it gets too bad. I am certain had we had such a system in place in 2008 we would not have got into the Ofsted category that we did.”

What's on offer?

In instances where councils require and are in receipt of support, the LGA Principal Adviser will be the key contact and co-ordinator of input from the LGA, CIB regional leads and TEASC structures. This is designed to provide a single point of contact for councils and a coordinated approach to improvement support.

In some regions, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships or their successor bodies/regional LGAs are supporting sector led improvement. Principal advisers work closely with these partnerships to share information and provide support in a collaborative way, according to the extent and nature of the role of the regional body in the area.



Sharing best practice

Learning from others in the sector is a key part of a sector-led approach – but it is often difficult to find the time or the right information.

What's on offer?

The Knowledge Hub is a free web-based service providing a single window to improvement in local government.

Enabling councils to share best practice and ideas, learn from each other and work collaboratively, it is an essential element of sector-led improvement. The Knowledge Hub provides a secure online knowledge-sharing platform for councillors and officers to connect and share with peers across local government.

It works by allowing users to create professional networks of peers (informal networks) and to join subject-based groups (formal networks). Each has a set of tools which allow members to interact with others and share ideas and resources through messages, searchable libraries, online conversations and suggestions.

There are over 120,000 registered users on the Knowledge Hub sharing learning across nearly 1400 groups on a wide variety of subjects. Some recent examples of the most popular discussions are:

- advice on writing a joint health and wellbeing strategy for a local area

- support for neighbourhood community budget pilots
- guidance on improving commissioning in children's services
- sharing practice on setting up police and crime panels
- advice on local flood risk management.

The Customer-Led Transformation Programme group has been successful in sharing outcomes to a wide audience using the Knowledge Hub. Through a series of live online discussions each project has been sharing successes and answering questions from peers on a whole range of customer-led initiatives. These include improving recycling rates, reducing youth offending, improving outcomes for high impact families and providing better support for deprived housing estates.

Future technical developments on the Knowledge Hub will include a range of refinements based on user feedback. There are also plans for improved links between the Knowledge Hub and LG Inform. To start sharing on the Knowledge Hub go to <https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk>



Next steps

As sector led improvement gains further momentum the LGA will continue to capture councils' experiences, refine and develop the support offer and put in place arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach.

For more information about sector-led improvement, see the LGA guide 'Sector-led improvement in local government' and www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement

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