

Local Government Taskforce
Performance Management Sub Group

Report on the Establishment of an Improvement Body in Northern Ireland

Introduction

A key element of the performance management framework recommended by the sub group is the establishment of an improvement body. The purpose of this report is to consider improvement support provided to local government in other jurisdictions, identify common themes and provide a number of options on the development of an improvement agency in Northern Ireland and make recommendations on the way forward.

Improvement Support in Scotland

In Scotland improvement support is provided by the Improvement Service (IS). It is a company limited by guarantee and was formed in September 2005 in collaboration with the Scottish Executive, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. The IS currently has a three year budget of £4.5m. Its aim is to support continuous improvement by building on the expertise within local authorities and working in partnership with stakeholders in the public, private and voluntary sectors. It serves 32 local authorities.

IS core objectives are as follows:

1. promote a learning culture & support collaborative working
2. build capacity to improve the skills of officers & elected members
3. promote good practice
4. promote the use of knowledge management
5. identify good practice & learn from external sources

Examples of IS activity so far include:

- A commissioned study of absence management.
- Recovery work with a local authority after it had received a very critical Best Value audit report.
- A commissioned report on leadership development in Councils.
- A review of procurement arrangements in local authorities.

- Monitoring the Scottish Executive's Efficient Government programme.
- Leading the Scottish Executive sponsored programme, Customer First.

Improvement Support in England & Wales

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) is a company which is wholly owned by the Local Government Association (LGA). It is the key organisation delivering continuous improvement in England and Wales. It serves 21,000 councillors and 410 local authorities. Its budget is almost £50m.

It is accountable to local government through a Board of Directors – half of whom are local government councillors.

The work of the IDeA is based around five key themes. These are:

- To build the corporate capacity of local government to deliver improvement.
- To improve the quality of political and managerial leadership in local government.
- To develop workforce capacity.
- To support the improvement of service delivery in priority areas.
- To strengthen the ability of local government to build sustainable communities.

The approach the IDeA has taken to stimulate sustainable improvement and development is to:

- Connect ideas and expertise to cross-fertilise solutions and accelerate progress.
- Focus on best practice and forward thinking, to enable individual councils and local government to learn systematically.
- Deliver a flexible range of tools and services.
- Carry risk on behalf of local government by innovating and incubating new joined-up but locally delivered initiatives.

The key elements of the IDeA's improvement toolkit include:

- Peer reviews – adopt a critical friend approach with the use of political and managerial peers.
- Development programmes for councillors, officers and top-teams.
- Direct improvement support to individual authorities.
- Effective knowledge sharing across the sector.
- Support to the delivery of the Beacon Scheme.

Common Themes

The following is a list of some of the common themes found across the IDeA and Scottish IS.

- Local government in England, Scotland and Wales is supported by some form of improvement agency.
- The IDeA and Scottish IS have a direct connection to local government.
- The IDeA is independent of central government while the IS is funded by the Scottish Executive.
- Councillors sit on the Board of Directors of both agencies.
- Improvement work helps to develop the capacity of the local government sector and individual councils within it.
- The improvement bodies use the expertise of councillors and officers who have experience of working in local authorities.
- The scale of the IDeA allows it to attract some of the best people from local government and beyond.
- Both agencies try to foster cross sector initiatives.
- Support from the improvement bodies to poorly performing councils enhances the ability of local government to manage under performance itself.
- The use of peer review provides the local government sector with the potential to lead its own improvement, reducing the need for external inspection and regulation.

- The work of the improvement agencies provides the how to do improvement while external inspection mainly identifies what needs done.
- The peer review process demonstrates that there is a clear relationship between corporate improvement and service improvement.

The establishment of an improvement body in Northern Ireland – some issues

- The local government sector currently is not supported by an improvement body.
- The framework recommended by the Performance Management Sub-Group is dependent on the establishment of an improvement body.
- The potential responsibilities for the improvement body would include:
 - Development of an assessment framework.
 - Development of a peer review process.
 - Assist in the development of national performance indicators.
 - Provide corporate capacity building programmes for poor performing councils.
 - Conduct service specific reviews at the request of councils.
 - Provide political and managerial peer support.
 - Provide political and managerial leadership development.
 - Carry out cross cutting issue reviews for the sector.
 - Encourage cross sector working.
 - Encourage shared learning across the sector and the public sector.
- Some of key issues which need to be addressed when considering the establishment of an improvement body include:
 - Is the local government sector in Northern Ireland of sufficient scale to develop an effective improvement body?
 - How would the improvement body be financed?
 - What will be the relationship between the improvement body and other sector organisations such as NILGA, SOLACE and the councils?
 - How will the improvement body relate to central government?
 - Who would have responsibility for the development of the improvement body?
 - What will be the legal identify of the improvement body?
 - Should the improvement body incorporate more of the public sector than just local government?
 - Is there a need for an interim arrangement given the timescales involved?

Potential options for the establishment of an improvement body

- Explore the possibility of Northern Ireland developing a regional association with the IDeA. The Welsh Local Government Association, for example, has one seat on the Board of Directors of the IDeA but still maintains its independence from the Local Government Association.
- Develop an improvement body specifically for the local government sector in Northern Ireland.
- Develop an improvement body for all or some elements of the public sector in Northern Ireland.

Recommendation

This report has only begun to scratch the surface in regards to the issues involved in developing an improvement body. This is a complex matter which is critical to the development of an effective local government sector and performance management framework. The sub-group recommends that a joint member / officer working group is established as soon as possible with the purpose of identifying the key issues involved, working up the options outlined in this report and recommending a preferred option for the establishment of an improvement body.