

Commonwealth Local Government Forum – Good Practice Scheme

Case study

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Date: 1998 to 2011

Location: A variety of countries across the Commonwealth, including Ghana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa and the UK

Mission: To improve the delivery of local services through the spread of good practice and to contribute towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals

Method: A partnership scheme that matched local authorities across the Commonwealth and organised exchange visits, work shadowing and the piloting of new initiatives

Spend: The April 2008 to March 2011 phase had a budget of £2.1 million;¹ local authority staff also voluntarily provided several thousand hours of their time, valued at £400,000²

Reach: A total of 34 projects, each involving two or three local authorities.³ The dissemination phase reached at least 500 local government stakeholders that participated in country-based workshops.⁴

Access: Open application process for local authorities in participating countries

Context

The Good Practice Scheme, led by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), sought to improve the delivery of local services through the spread of good practice across the Commonwealth. It did this by partnering local authorities in selected Commonwealth countries around a distinct project, and providing funding and support for partners to come together and share insights and knowledge.

The CLGF is a membership organisation that 'works to promote and strengthen democratic local government across the Commonwealth and to encourage the exchange of best practice'.⁵ In 2005, CLGF members agreed a set of good governance standards called the 'Aberdeen Agenda'. This outlined a 'commitment to continuous capacity development of democratic local government' and recommended that the CLGF helps to build international partnerships and assist the exchange of good practice and support.⁶

The Good Practice Scheme focused on supporting local authorities and local government associations from across the Commonwealth, often involving partner organisations from a variety of sectors. Core funding came from the Department for International Development (DfID), with some projects receiving additional resources from partner organisations. Many UK councils acted as partners in the scheme, including Cardiff, Glasgow, Hastings, Lewisham and Warwickshire councils.

Ways of working

Selection

The scheme matched target councils and local government associations from Ghana, India, Jamaica, Pakistan, Sierra Leone and South Africa with local authorities in India, South Africa and the UK. The

“Partnerships were designed to exchange good practice and generate innovative solutions to shared challenges.”

countries involved in the scheme were selected by DfID and CLGF, with a particular focus on countries with a decentralising agenda and mature local government infrastructure. Within each chosen country, there was a pool of councils working on different projects around a particular theme.

Partnerships were designed to exchange good practice and generate innovative solutions to shared challenges identified by local government associations in each country, with support from the CLGF. In some cases, government ministries were also involved in identifying country themes. The CLGF then matched suitable councils with an expressed interest in being involved in the programme. Most partnerships included one partner from the North and one from the South, but some involved three partner countries.

Project support

Once a project was identified, the CLGF would help to develop a project plan and could provide up to £40,000 in in-country costs to support selected project activities.⁷ The participating councils did not receive any payment. Partners would agree set milestones with the CLGF and project manage the work themselves. Funded activities included exchange visits, work shadowing, the piloting of new initiatives and related activities. The aim of these activities was to reduce poverty through more efficient local service provision.⁸

“Partnership working was at the heart of the programme.”

Local authority staff, including councillors and officers from both partner authorities, took part in visits to each other; providing support and advice, and sharing their own experiences of delivering public services. Partnership working was ‘at the

heart of the programme’, with more than 80% of projects resulting in formal partnerships between local organisations in the host country.⁹ Some councils also started working with new stakeholders, including private sector companies and regional development agencies.¹⁰

Dissemination

Dissemination activities played an important role at the end of the scheme. They aimed to:

- give participants an opportunity to evaluate their projects in the context of the wider programme
- give non-participating councils an opportunity to learn from the programme and encourage peer-to-peer sharing
- bring together key stakeholders to discuss national policy around specific issues.

One national-level seminar was held in each country, normally through the local government association, to disseminate findings. In the UK, the CLGF helped to set up an e-network and published e-bulletins to encourage exchange between participating councils.

Impact

Several English councils have described the benefits of taking part in the programme. For example, Leeds City Council worked with Durban and Middelburg in South Africa to look at public sector procurement and business support.¹¹ Part of the work examined the relationships between the two municipal authorities, with Leeds adopting ideas piloted in South Africa to enhance joint

services. This included holding a free seminar for local businesses to encourage dialogue with the construction sector supply chain, based on a workshop held in Middelburg. A review carried out by the CLGF into the third phase of the project also described a range of programme outcomes for partners outside of the UK.¹²

“Practitioner exchanges offer the potential for bringing transformational external independent ideas and can generate a new commitment and drive for change.”¹⁴

DfID has repeatedly evaluated the programme and commissioned an independent review of the second phase in 2006. Although the full report is unavailable publicly, one evaluation interviewee described how: ‘Practitioner exchanges offer the potential for bringing transformational external independent ideas and can generate a new commitment and drive for change within the municipalities concerned. This was often in ways that would not have been achieved through other means – such as the use of consultancy services.’¹³

However, some projects saw delays in setting up programmes and poor communication between partners. Concerns were also raised about the capability of UK local authorities to provide advice on development and their lack of accountability in offering this advice as unpaid participants rather than consultants.¹⁵

Although the Good Practice Scheme came to an end in 2011, the CLGF continues to support local authorities from across the Commonwealth to share learning and experiences, including through:

- a practitioners’ database
- biannual conferences
- the *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*.¹⁶

A successor programme to the Good Practice Scheme is focusing on building local governments’ capacity to influence national policymaking processes. DfID has continued to fund the CLGF with £4.5 million over the three years 2013–16 to support local government in the Commonwealth.¹⁷ Outside of the UK, a Pacific Good Practice Scheme has been running since 2011, which partners local authorities in New Zealand with those in Papua New Guinea and Pacific Island nations.¹⁸

Insights

Learning from international examples can stimulate innovation

Learning from international examples and building relationships with peers in other countries is an effective way of finding out about different approaches to delivering public services. Although the context is often very different, lessons from international cases can often stimulate innovation and creativity by highlighting different ways of working.

Sharing learning with non-participating areas can increase the impact of a programme

Sharing learning from a programme with places *outside* of a scheme helps to spread the experiences and knowledge of those who have taken part. This has the potential to increase the impact of a programme and can provide the opportunity to make further connections with similar organisations. To make the most of this, dissemination activities should occur throughout a programme – sharing work in progress rather than waiting until the end of a scheme.

Further resources

Commonwealth Local Government Forum, '[About the Good Practice Scheme](#)', Commonwealth Local Government Forum, London, 2014.

Duchnowski, R., '[Review of the Commonwealth Local Government Good Practice Scheme](#)', *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, no. 10, 2012, pp. 150–8.

Notes

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About the authors

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All errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

About the project

Last year, the Institute for Government began a major research project on public service delivery at a local level in England. This is a vast, complex terrain and there are many important areas that require urgent attention – whether it is how to drive efficiency savings, deliver digital transformation or make effective use of all providers in a local area, including voluntary and private sector organisations. We decided to focus on one aspect that is critical to achieving better public service outcomes for citizens: joining up and integrating public services around local, citizen needs.

Our briefing paper, [Joining Up Public Services around Local, Citizen Needs](#), identified five perennial barriers that repeatedly hinder integration at a local level, as well as several insights on how to tackle them. Limited sharing of what works (and doesn't work) emerged as a critical barrier that needs urgent attention. Although variation is crucial in ensuring that public services meet local needs, not learning from what has been tried before, or elsewhere, is costly, time intensive and risks duplicating the progress made in other parts of the country. At a time when capacity within local government is declining, and less money is available for service delivery, we cannot afford to keep reinventing the wheel.

A set of eight case studies, including this one, provides more detail about the methods and impact of different approaches designed to support learning between areas. Our accompanying paper, [Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate services and improve outcomes](#), provides much-needed clarity on what would help people leading integration programmes to share experiences and learn from one another to improve outcomes on the ground.

For more information and resources, visit www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery

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