Local Government Association – Corporate Peer Challenges

Date: 2011 to the present

Location: England (mostly)

Mission: To support councils to take responsibility for their own performance and improvement

Method: Peer review

Spend: Councils have contributed more than 2,500 days of senior councillor and officer time to corporate peer challenge teams (as of the end of March 2014); equivalent to millions of pounds worth of consultancy.

Reach: More than 400 peer challenges have been delivered since 2011, involving over two-thirds of the sector

Access: Free

Context

The Local Government Association’s (LGA’s) peer challenges are sector-led, voluntary visits from a team of peers, designed to help local authorities assess how they are progressing, and provide feedback and recommendations for further development. This case study focuses on Corporate Peer Challenges – one aspect of the LGA’s wider peer challenge offer.

All LGA peer challenges are based on the fundamental principle that local authorities are responsible for their own performance and they are accountable for this locally (not nationally). Modelled on the Improvement and Development Agency’s (IDeA) peer review process, the LGA began launching a suite of peer challenges from 2011, following the Getting Closer restructure, which saw five separate LGA organisations, including IDeA, come together as one slimmed-down, overarching organisation. Local authorities are the primary focus of the peer challenges on offer, but the bespoke nature of support means that local partners from other sectors can also be involved. Support can be provided to a single local authority or a group of councils.

“The bespoke nature of support means that local partners from other sectors can also be involved.”
Ways of working

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge is available free of charge to all councils and fire and rescue services in England. It is a core part of the LGA’s sector-led improvement offer and all local authorities are encouraged to take part. Authorities are able to have one Corporate Peer Challenge every three years.

Councils commission a peer challenge through the LGA by contacting their LGA regional principal adviser. In some cases, the LGA may also suggest that a council takes part, but the programme is entirely voluntary. A scoping meeting is then held between the host council and the LGA, normally four to six months in advance of the peer challenge visit. This meeting is designed to agree the main focus of the challenge and to help guide decisions around choosing the peer challenge team. All Corporate Peer Challenges explore the following five fundamental questions; but, beyond this, authorities are able to shape the focus around their specific needs:

- Do we understand the local context and have we established a clear set of priorities in response?
- Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long-term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
- Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
- Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
- Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas to deliver the agreed priorities?

Challenge teams always include a local authority chief executive as the lead peer, an elected member and an LGA challenge manager. The other members of the team are drawn from a wide spectrum of people and can include additional councillors and officers, other public sector professionals such as from a local clinical commissioning group, and people with an academic, private sector or voluntary sector background.

“Inevitably the depth of knowledge you come away with about a particular service is greater than the knowledge you carried in with you.”

The Corporate Peer Challenge approach is pitched at a broad organisational level and does not include in-depth service reviews. Typically, a challenge team will visit a council for three to four days, meeting with political leaders and senior managers, and holding discussion groups with staff and partners. The approach is flexible and led by the demands of the council, which decides who it is best for the peer team to meet. During the visit, the challenge team are able to share their experience, ideas and learning with practitioners throughout the host council. This also provides the challenge team themselves with plenty of opportunities to share and learn from each other as well as the host council. On the final day of the visit, the challenge team presents their findings and there is a chance for the host council to ask questions. The challenge team then produces a final report, which is sent directly to the host council, normally around two weeks after the visit. The expectation is that the peer team will go away with a better understanding of the issues the council is grappling with and be able to explore the barriers, opportunities and potential areas for improvement.
All host councils are offered free follow-up support from the LGA and the challenge team. Like the peer visit itself, this is bespoke and designed around the council’s needs. It could take the form of:

- an improvement planning session led by the LGA
- a progress check, where, for example, members of the challenge team return to the council and conduct a review
- workshops to continue discussions around the recommendations or the development of future plans.

The peer challenge experience can also help to build ongoing relationships and catalyse an informal network between the peer challenge team and the host council.

**Impact**

In 2013, the LGA commissioned the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff Business School to undertake an independent evaluation of the LGA’s Corporate Peer Challenge programme. The evaluation found that the ability to tailor each peer challenge to a council was regarded as one of the great strengths of the offer. For example, 94% of respondents to a survey conducted as part of the evaluation reported that the process had been well tailored to the specific needs and focus of their council.6

A survey of senior officers from the first 40 councils to have a Corporate Peer Challenge, along with interviews with leaders and senior officers from these councils, found that the Corporate Peer Challenge impacted councils by:

- promoting greater self-awareness
- increasing self-confidence
- enhancing reputation
- encouraging more outward-looking behaviour and greater engagement with regional and national initiatives.7

Several councils have described the direct impact that a peer challenge has had on their services in a set of case studies published by the LGA.8 More than two-thirds of respondents to an LGA survey reported that the Corporate Peer Challenge had led to improvements in the way their council was run.9 In the evaluation study mentioned previously, 78% of respondents said that their council had developed an action plan in response to a peer challenge report. The study also found that, in a number of cases, the Corporate Peer Challenge process had increased councillors’ appetite for learning from other authorities. Some councils increased their confidence in working with partners and local communities, and participating in regional or national initiatives such as the LGA.10

Although many within the sector accept peer challenge as the right approach in supporting councils to improve, there remains scope for further work. Suggestions include:

- greater emphasis on challenge teams offering new ideas in their feedback and providing more rigorous follow-up support11
- greater flexibility in the focus of the peer challenge, such as widening the scope to include performance management or engagement with local people12
- adapting the approach to make it easier to look at partnership working, for example by reviewing areas rather than local authorities and involving other partner agencies in challenge teams.13
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Following the evaluation, the LGA has made available several reports looking at the overarching lessons from each peer challenge programme, for example Adult Social Care Peer Challenges: Sharing the learning and In Good Shape: Learning and good practice from the early health and wellbeing peer challenges. The LGA also conducts its own monitoring activities after all peer challenges and has commissioned a second evaluation of the programme for 2016.

**Insights**

*Sector-led and peer-led programmes can make it easier to gain traction at a local level*

Sector-led and peer-led support programmes often have greater legitimacy than those run by external organisations or government bodies. This can encourage people to share experiences openly and increase the potential for guidance and challenge that resonates with areas, as those providing suggestions for improvement are perceived as having grounding in the sector and credibility.

*Tailoring programmes to local needs can increase buy-in*

Tailoring or co-designing a programme of support also helps to make learning activities relevant to a local place. When support is purposeful and focused on ‘live’ issues, it has a greater chance of bringing a group together around a shared purpose and common outlook. In the process, this increases the likelihood that support will lead to tangible changes in the way services and organisations are run.

**Further resources**


Notes


7. Ibid., p. 3.


13. Ibid., pp. 2 and 4.


About the authors

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to all those who we spoke to outside of the Institute for Government, who gave their time generously and whose insights and experiences are reflected here. In particular we would like to thank Neil Shaw from the LGA for providing us with invaluable insights. We are also grateful to our Institute colleagues; particularly Jo Casebourne, Nehal Davison and Caoimhe Udom for providing valuable support, advice and guidance throughout our research, Nicola Hughes and Daniel Thornton for their constructive feedback and advice on drafts, Matthew Batchelor for managing the publication process, and Nicole Valentinuzzi for communications advice and support.

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](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery)
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Copies of this case study are available at:
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August 2016
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