

Evaluation of sector-led improvement

Companion Report: survey of heads of policy and
performance 2013

October 2013



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Evaluation of sector-led improvement

This report forms part of the Local Government Association (LGA) evaluation of sector-led improvement. Other outputs from the evaluation can be found here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>.

Sector-led improvement

With changes to the nationally imposed inspection and assessment regime, a new approach to improvement has been developed by local government. This was set out in the LGA's document 'Taking the Lead' in February 2011, supplemented in June 2012 by "Sector-led improvement in local government"¹ which describes a coordinated approach to sector-led improvement across local government, the support being provided and where to go for further information and advice.

The approach is based on the following key principles:

- councils are responsible for their own performance and improvement and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for local people in their area
- councils are primarily accountable to local communities (not government or the inspectorates) and stronger accountability through increased transparency helps local people drive further improvement
- councils have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole (evidenced by sharing best practice, offering member and officer peers, etc.)
- the role of the LGA is to maintain an overview of the performance of the sector in order to identify potential performance challenges and opportunities – and to provide tools and support to help councils take advantage of this new approach.

'Taking the Lead' identified a small core set of activities that are commonly undertaken by councils who proactively take responsibility for their own performance and improvement. This common set of activities provides the framework for sector-led improvement across councils' services and activities. It is also the framework around which the LGA's offer of support to councils is based, as follows:

- strengthening local accountability
- inviting challenge from one's peers
- learning from good practice and through regional structures and networks
- utilising transparent and comparable performance information
- investing in leadership.

¹ <http://www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement>

The evaluation

The LGA's evaluation looks at both the overall approach to sector-led improvement and the specific offers of support from the LGA. It is running over a two year period, with the main aim of understanding whether, in the context of reduced resources within the sector:

- the approach to sector-led improvement has the confidence of the sector and the government, and the trust of the public
- the sector has been able to strengthen local accountability
- the sector is adopting the sector-led improvement approach and continues to improve with a reduced burden of inspection, and in the absence of top down performance assessment
- the tools offered to the sector have had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself.

A baseline report was published in February 2013. In addition, a number of companion reports, of which this is one, are being published alongside the main evaluation reports, looking at specific issues in more detail. This companion report complements the final evaluation report, which can be found here:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>.

Summary

Introduction

This online survey of heads of policy and performance forms part of the two year evaluation of sector-led improvement, and the key findings are reported in the final evaluation report. A baseline survey was conducted over the course of May and June 2012 and this report highlights the results of the follow-up survey in October 2013, and any changes between the two surveys.

The purpose of the surveys was to evaluate the extent to which the support for sector-led improvement provided by the LGA is meeting the needs of the sector, as well as monitoring the extent to which sector-led improvement as an approach has the confidence of the sector and is resulting in strengthened local accountability and improvement.

Respondents

The online survey was sent via email to heads of policy or performance in 388 councils and fire and rescue authorities across England², and was in the field over the course of October 2013. Two reminders were sent out, and a total of 117 responses were received – a response rate of 30 per cent.

Key messages

Authorities were taking a number of steps to strengthen local accountability, and had maintained levels of activity on this since the baseline survey. Levels of activity on performance and improvement had also been maintained, with one notable increase being the proportion of authorities who had invited challenge from peers.

This was despite a difficult economic climate. Many respondents reported that their authorities had taken this climate as a driver to increase engagement with their communities, focus on priorities and find new ways of doing things, but that the limited financial and staff resources available had made this very challenging.

Awareness of the sector-led improvement approach was high, and significantly higher than in the baseline survey. Amongst those who were aware, three quarters agreed that the approach is the right one. In addition, well over half of those who were aware of the support offer from the LGA said that this support had already had a great or moderate positive impact.

Local accountability

Current activity

Respondents reported that their authorities were undertaking a number of activities to strengthen local accountability and to engage with residents to set local priorities.

² Note that there are 398 councils and fire and rescue services in England, however twenty of them share performance services.

The activities most commonly conducted at the time of the survey (or in the 12 months previous) were:

- consulting on proposals to get feedback and ideas (94 per cent)
- using social media to communicate with residents (91 per cent)
- publishing performance information annually or more often, in a format and style that can be easily accessed and understood by residents (81 per cent).

The results suggest that levels of activity on local accountability and engagement have been maintained, with no significant difference in the proportion conducting each activity compared to the baseline survey. The only significant change was publishing expenditure online³: 61 per cent of respondents' authorities were doing this, compared to 47 per cent that were doing so in the baseline survey.

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words what, if any, positive outcomes these activities had had in terms of the service they had been able to provide for their local community. The answers they gave most commonly fell into three broad areas. They reported that these activities had:

- influenced strategic thinking, and in particular helped with identifying priorities, budget recommendations and creating plans
- influenced service delivery or specific projects
- led to an improved relationship with their local residents, with an improved reputation, increased satisfaction and greater buy in to local authority decisions.

Levels of local accountability and engagement

Respondents were shown a scale depicting different levels of local accountability and engagement with residents, running from 'no buy in to local accountability and engagement activity' through to 'local accountability and engagement are strategic issues of high priority'.

They were asked first, to indicate which of the options most closely described their local authority currently; and secondly, to indicate which of the options most closely described what their local authority aspired to.

Thirty per cent of respondents thought their authority was at the level it aspired to be at; whilst 61 per cent of respondents said that their authorities aspired to improve their level of accountability and engagement.

³ In addition to publishing spend over £500, senior salaries and any other expenditure that must be published as a requirement of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.

Driving improvement

Current improvement activity

Respondents reported a number of steps their authorities were taking to understand performance and drive improvement.⁴ The activities most commonly conducted at the time of the survey (or in the 12 months previous) were:

- sharing information and best practice with others (89 per cent)
- using scrutiny to challenge and improve local authority services (84 per cent).

Again, levels of activity had been maintained since the baseline survey, and in addition there was an increase in authorities inviting challenge from peers.

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words what, if any, positive outcomes these activities had had in terms of the service they had been able to provide for their local community. The answers they gave most commonly fell into four broad areas. They reported that these activities had:

- resulted in action plans for improvement, or had informed strategies and service delivery
- enabled poor performance to be identified and addressed
- contributed to a culture of aspiration and continuous improvement within the authority
- led to savings and better use of resources.

Economic climate

When asked whether the ongoing challenging economic climate had affected their authority's work to strengthen local accountability and drive improvement over the 12 months previous to the survey, the most common answer (51 per cent) was that the economic climate had affected this work in both positive and negative ways.

Reasons given for this suggested that, whilst the economic climate has encouraged positive outcomes such as an increased drive towards engagement, increased focus on priorities and an impetus to find improved ways of doing things, the limited financial and staff resources available had made this very challenging.

Skills and capacity for sector-led improvement

Respondents were generally confident in the skills and capacity of both their own authorities and of the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve, although slightly more confident about their own authority than the overall sector. Ninety three per cent were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent, compared to 79 per cent for the sector. Levels of confidence had not changed significantly since the baseline survey.

⁴ Please note that respondents were reminded that improvement can include maintaining service levels or service user outcomes in the face of a reduction in resources, as this requires an increase in productivity.

The sector-led improvement offer from the LGA

Awareness of the approach

Awareness of the sector-led improvement approach was high. Eighty four per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount; significantly higher than the 59 per cent that had heard at least a moderate amount about 'Taking the Lead' (as sector-led improvement was referred to at the time) in the baseline survey.

Views on the approach

Those respondents who had heard at least a little about the approach were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "The approach to sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context."

The majority were supportive, with three quarters (75 per cent) either agreeing or strongly agreeing – the same proportion as in the baseline survey. Of the remaining respondents, the majority were neutral (18 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed).

Awareness of the offer of support

The LGA has offered a number of resources, most of which are free of charge, to support the sector in taking a lead in its own improvement. Respondents were asked which of these they had heard about.

Levels of awareness were highest for Knowledge Hub (91 per cent), peer challenge (87 per cent), and LG Inform (83 per cent). These were also the offers that had the highest levels of awareness in the baseline survey.

Awareness of nearly all the offers was higher than in the baseline survey, but not to a statistically significant extent. The only exception was awareness of Knowledge Hub, which was significantly higher in this survey (91 per cent were aware compared to 82 per cent in the baseline).

Impact of the offer of support

Those respondents who had some awareness of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer were asked the extent to which they thought that the support and resources had, to date, had a positive impact on both their own authority's capacity and the sector's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

Respondents were positive about the impact of the support and resources to date. For both their own authority and the sector as a whole, well over half of respondents thought that the support and resources had had a great or moderate positive impact (58 per cent for their authority and 57 per cent for the sector).

The role of councillors

In order to inform the LGA's future support offer, all respondents were then asked to outline what support, if any, they thought that councillors in their authority needed in terms of strengthening their authority's accountability to local people and further driving improvement locally.

Responses were varied but commonly centred on the need to help councillors deal with the challenging financial situation. A number of aspects were highlighted, including understanding how this impacts on their role as councillor, and how to support communities to build capacity and self-reliance.

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The purpose of this survey was to evaluate the extent to which the support for sector-led improvement provided by the LGA is meeting the needs of the sector, as well as monitoring the extent to which sector-led improvement has the confidence of the sector and is resulting in strengthened local accountability and improvement.

Methodology

The online survey was sent via email to heads of policy or performance in 388 councils and fire and rescue authorities across England⁵, and was in the field over the course of October 2013. Two reminders were sent out, and a total of 117 responses were received – a response rate of 30 per cent.

Whilst this is a standard response rate for a survey such as this, this level of response means that the results should strictly be taken as a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents, rather than as representative of heads of policy or performance overall. However it is fair to say that the results do provide a broad indication of the position of the sector more widely.

A breakdown of response rate by authority type is shown in Table 1. There was a fairly consistent response across all authority types, with the exception of fire and rescue authorities, which had a higher than average response rate of 44 per cent, and metropolitan districts which had a lower than average response rate of 22 per cent.

	Respondents	Total authorities	Response rate (%)
Shire county	8	27	30
Shire district	55	191	29
English unitary	17	56	30
Metropolitan district	8	36	22
London borough	9	33	27
Fire and rescue	20	45	44
Total	117	388	30

Table 2 breaks down the response rate by region. The table shows a broadly consistent response rate across regions, although a lower than average response was received from the North East, with a higher than average response from the East Midlands.

⁵ Note that there are 398 councils and fire and rescue services in England, however twenty of them share performance services.

Table 2: Response breakdown by region			
	Respondents	Total authorities	Response rate (%)
East Midlands	20	49	41
East of England	18	55	33
London	9	34	26
North East	3	16	19
North West	10	46	22
South East	24	80	30
South West	14	44	32
West Midlands	12	38	32
Yorkshire and the Humber	7	26	27
Total	117	388	30

Please note the following when reading the report:

- Where the difference between the results of this survey and the baseline survey is statistically significant, this is stated within the report.
- Where tables and figures report the base, the description in brackets refers to the group of people who were asked the question. The number provided refers to the number who answered each question. Please note that bases vary throughout the survey.
- Throughout the report percentages in figures and tables may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding.
- The following conventions are used in tables: ‘*’ - less than 0.5 per cent; ‘0’ – no observations; ‘-’ – category not applicable/data not available.

Survey of heads of policy and performance

This section outlines the full set of survey results.

Local accountability

Current activity

Respondents were presented with a number of activities that local authorities might conduct to strengthen local accountability and to engage with residents to set local priorities, and were asked to state which, if any, their authority was currently conducting or planning to conduct.

The results suggest that levels of activity on local accountability and engagement have been maintained, with no significant difference in the proportion conducting each activity compared to the baseline survey. The only exception to this was publishing expenditure online⁶; 61 per cent of respondents' authorities were doing this, which was significantly higher than the 47 per cent doing so in the baseline survey.

Table 3 outlines the results, with the activities presented in order of frequency. The table shows that the activities most commonly conducted at the time of the survey (or in the 12 months previous) were:

- consulting on proposals to get feedback and ideas (94 per cent)
- using social media to communicate with residents (91 per cent)
- publishing performance information annually or more often, in a format and style that can be easily accessed and understood by residents (81 per cent).

Whilst the results demonstrate high levels of engagement there were also a number of activities on the list that a notable proportion of respondents' authorities had no plans to undertake. It is worth noting that to some extent this is to be expected – the tools listed below are just some of a range of tools that councils may choose to use to engage with residents, Different methods will be appropriate for different areas and cost considerations will be a factor.

- fifty four per cent stated that their authority has no current plans to use a budget simulation tool to get feedback on spending priorities.
- forty nine per cent stated that their authority has no current plans to carry out an in-depth participatory budgeting exercise to inform local spending decisions.
- forty four per cent have no current plans to use citizens' juries (or other deliberative techniques) to inform local decisions.

⁶ In addition to publishing spend over £500, senior salaries and any other expenditure that must be published as a requirement of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.

Table 3: Listed below are a number of activities that local authorities might conduct to strengthen local accountability and to engage with residents to set local priorities. As far as you are aware, does your authority conduct, or plan to conduct, any of the following activities?

	Doing this currently or have done in the last 12 months	Plan to do this within the next 12 months	No current plans to do this	Don't know
	%	%	%	%
Consulting on particular proposals to get feedback and ideas	94	3	3	0
Using social media to communicate with residents	91	8	1	1
Publishing performance information annually or more often, in a format and style that can be easily accessed and understood by residents	81	15	2	2
Conducting resident surveys or panel surveys to get feedback	79	9	9	3
Encouraging feedback on local authority performance via various channels such as the website, feedback forms and face to face	68	15	15	3
Publishing expenditure online ⁷	61	3	26	11
Opening a dialogue with residents to get their views on current performance ⁸	53	16	27	3
Use of neighbourhood or area-based panels	47	7	35	11
Using citizens' juries (or other deliberative techniques) to inform local decisions	32	11	44	13
Using a budget simulation tool (for example, YouChoose or Delib Budget Simulator) to get feedback on spending priorities	25	6	54	15
In depth participatory budgeting exercises to inform local spending decisions	22	10	49	19

Base: all respondents (117 respondents)

A small number of respondents also highlighted other activities that their authorities are undertaking to strengthen local accountability and to engage with residents to set local priorities. These included:

- local area partnerships and community led plans
- use of parishes
- face to face bespoke sessions with hard-to-reach groups
- engaging with customers when looking at demand for services (using systems thinking methodology)
- member engagement
- substantial engagement through residents groups, service user groups and voluntary organisations
- area committees/area plans.

The 116 respondents whose authority had conducted one or more of the local accountability activities in Table 3 were asked what, if any, positive outcomes these

⁷ Not including spend over £500, senior salaries or any other expenditure that must be published as a requirement of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.

⁸ This could be through various mediums including face to face and online.

activities had had in terms of the service they had been able to provide for their local community. Eighty one respondents (70 per cent) provided examples and these are summarised below.

- Respondents reported that these activities had influenced their **strategic thinking**, and in particular helped with **identifying priorities, budget recommendations and creating plans**. Some examples of this include:

“Supported the development of an options paper for budgetary purposes which has taken into account the results from our wide ranging consultation including 21 focus groups with various sectors of the local community.”

Shire district, West Midlands

“Participatory budgeting has been successful in engaging local communities in a debate about their priorities; regular focus groups/surveys have identified areas for improvement and informed the council's investments.”

County, South East

- Respondents also provided examples where local accountability had **influenced service delivery or specific projects**, for example:

“Consultation either by survey or focus groups regularly used to inform service review and design and feedback is used to inform final proposals.”

Metropolitan district, West Midlands

“Neighbourhood boards are helping focus activity in the most needed area - for example significant action was taken to mitigate the actions of loan sharks who suddenly became very active in a deprived neighbourhood.”

Shire district, East Midlands

- Some respondents also highlighted that these activities have led to an **improved relationship with their local residents**, with an improved reputation, increased satisfaction and greater buy in to local authority decisions, for example:

“Fundamental to delivering a balanced budget the residents can live with.”

London borough

“...co-design generates resident buy in and understanding.”

County, South East

- Further ways in which respondents said that local accountability and engagement had led to improvements included:
 - the generation of new ideas

- increased community resilience through engagement and support
- more effective performance management
- better understanding of the impact of decisions and the opportunity to negate any adverse impact.

Levels of local accountability and engagement

Respondents were shown a scale depicting different levels of local accountability and engagement with residents. They were asked first, to indicate which of the options most closely described their local authority; and secondly, to indicate which of the options most closely described what their local authority aspired to. The scenarios are laid out in Table 4.

Table 4: Local accountability and engagement scenarios
<p>No 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity from politicians and senior staff.</p> <p>The level of activity does <u>not</u> meet the minimum requirements of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency - http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/transparencycode</p>
<p>Low level of 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity amongst politicians and senior staff.</p> <p>The level of activity meets the minimum requirements of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.</p>
<p>Moderate level of 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity amongst politicians and senior staff.</p> <p>Activities to achieve local accountability and engagement are undertaken, but on an ad hoc basis across a small number of service areas.</p>
<p>High level of 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity amongst politicians and senior staff.</p> <p>Local accountability and engagement are seen as important and efforts are made to ensure that a variety of steps are taken to achieve this.</p>
<p>Local accountability and engagement are seen by politicians and senior staff as strategic issues of high priority.</p> <p>Local accountability and engagement activities are integrated throughout the local authority's operations.</p>
<p>Don't know</p>

Figure 1 shows the level that respondents think their authority is currently at, as well as the level at which they think their authority aspires to be.

In terms of the current level of local accountability and engagement, 54 per cent of respondents identified their authority as being either at the 'high' level of local accountability and engagement or the 'highest' scenario – i.e. local accountability and engagement were 'strategic issues of high priority' in their authority (43 per cent and 11 per cent respectively).

This is slightly higher than the 51 per cent who said this in the baseline survey, but the difference is not large enough to be statistically significant. There was however a rise at the other end of the scale – a significantly higher proportion of respondents

answered that their authority was at the 'low' level (six per cent compared to one per cent in the baseline). This was accompanied by a lower proportion of respondents who thought that their authority was at the 'moderate' level.

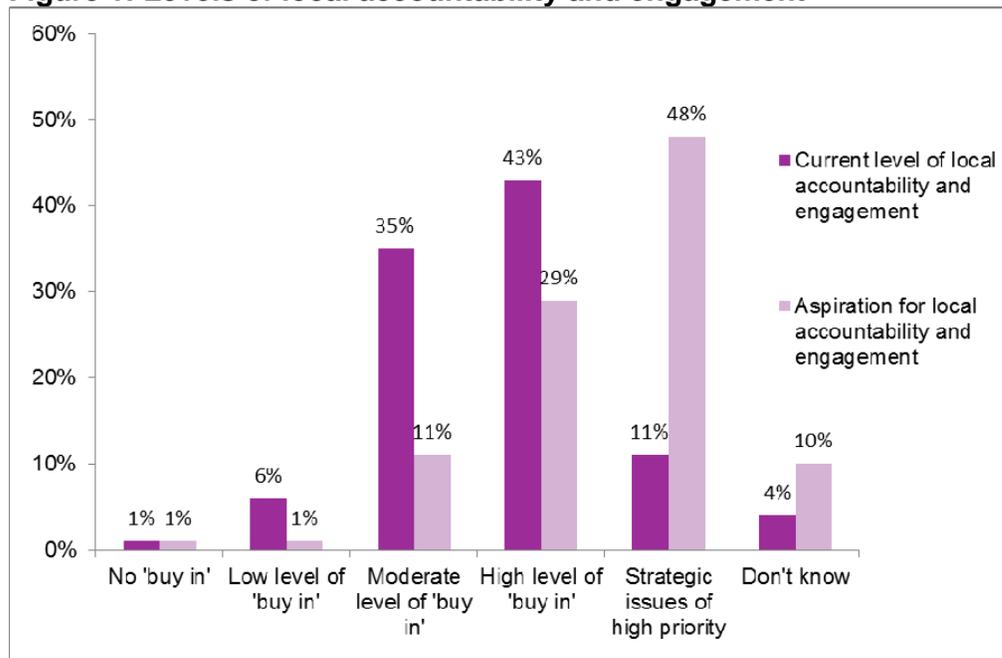
In terms of the level of accountability and engagement that respondents thought their authorities aspired to:

- The greatest proportion of respondents (48 per cent) indicated that their authority aspired to the 'highest' scenario laid out in the survey – i.e. that local accountability and engagement were 'strategic issues of high priority'.
- Twenty nine per cent of respondents stated that their authority aspired to be at a 'high' level.
- A small proportion of respondents (eleven per cent) stated that their authority aspired to a 'moderate' level, with just a couple of respondents stating that their authority has low or no aspirations around local accountability.

The proportion saying that their authority aspired to the 'highest' scenario was significantly lower than in the baseline survey (48 per cent compared to 61 per cent in the baseline). However this is partly due to a higher proportion answering 'don't know' (10 per cent compared to 4 per cent in the baseline), and was therefore not accompanied by a significantly higher proportion of people saying that their authority aspired to the lower scenarios.

An analysis of individual responses shows that 30 per cent of respondents thought their authority was at the level it aspired to be at, whilst 61 per cent of respondents' authorities aspired to improve their level of accountability and engagement.

Figure 1: Levels of local accountability and engagement



Base: all respondents (117 respondents)

In order to inform the LGA's support offer on local accountability, respondents were asked to provide information on any further support that they would find useful. Forty four respondents provided an answer (38 per cent of all respondents). Several respondents said that no further support was needed. Amongst those that did suggest extra support, responses were varied but covered the following themes:

- sharing of innovative practice and case studies of what works
- advice and guidance on tools and techniques that can be used
- issues around politics and councillors – for example how to explain to councillors the importance of accountability, and its role in the democratic process
- guidance on data transparency, as well as how to encourage transparency and examples of benefits that authorities have experienced from publishing performance data
- advice on how accountability and engagement can help authorities deal with budgetary pressures – for example through influencing behaviours, expectations and demand for services as well as consulting on service changes/reductions
- help with obtaining and benchmarking performance data.

Driving improvement

Current improvement activity

Respondents were presented with a number of steps their authority might be taking to understand performance and drive improvement, in the context of a reduced burden of inspection and the absence of top down performance management from central government. Respondents were asked to state which, if any, of these activities their authority was conducting or planning to conduct.

Improvement was defined as including maintenance of service levels or service user outcomes in the face of a reduction in resources, as this requires an increase in productivity.

Table 5 outlines the results, with the activities presented in order of frequency. As with the baseline survey, the activities most commonly conducted at the time of the survey (or in the 12 months previous) were:

- sharing information and best practice with others (89 per cent)
- using scrutiny to challenge and improve local authority services (84 per cent)
- analysis and benchmarking of performance data (83 per cent).

The results suggest that authorities have maintained their level of improvement activities, with no significant change since the baseline survey. The only exception to this is 'challenge from peers in other authorities and partner organisations'; a significantly higher proportion said that their authority was doing this than in the baseline (59 per cent compared to 42 per cent in the baseline).

There were also some activities on the list that several respondents' thought their authorities had no current plans to undertake. In particular:

- twenty per cent had no current plans to invite peer mentoring and support from external authorities
- nineteen per cent had no current plans to undertake self-assessment activity over and above standard internal audit
- although there was an increase in authorities inviting challenge from peers in other authorities and partner organisations, nineteen per cent said they had no current plans to do this.⁹

Table 5: Please indicate which steps, if any, your authority is taking to understand performance and drive improvement¹⁰

	Doing this currently or have done in the last 12 months	Plan to do this within the next 12 months	No current plans to do this	Don't know
	%	%	%	%
Sharing information and best practice with others	89	7	3	2
Using scrutiny to challenge and improve local authority services	84	5	7	4
Analysis and benchmarking of performance data	83	11	4	2
Developing leadership skills	68	15	7	10
Encouraging councillors and officers to participate in learning and support networks and relevant professional associations	67	11	10	12
Challenge from peers in other authorities and partner organisations	59	16	19	6
Self-assessment activity over and above standard internal audit	52	16	19	13
Peer mentoring and support from external authorities	45	10	20	25

Base: all respondents (117 respondents)

The 116 respondents whose authorities had conducted at least one of the improvement activities in Table 5 were asked what, if any, positive outcomes these activities had in terms of the service they had been able to provide for their local community. Sixty one respondents (53 per cent) provided examples and these are summarised below.

- The most common examples given by respondents were that these activities had resulted in **action plans for improvement**, or had **informed strategies and service delivery**. Some examples include:

⁹ It is worth noting though that two of the 22 authorities that said this had already had an LGA peer challenge early in the process (over a year ago), and therefore would not be expected to do this again in the next 12 months.

¹⁰ The full question text was: "In the context of a reduced burden of inspection and the absence of top down performance management from central government (apart from inspection in high risk areas like safeguarding and the annual audit process), please indicate below which steps, if any, your authority is taking to understand performance and drive improvement.

Please note that improvement can include maintaining service levels or service user outcomes in the face of a reduction in resources, as this requires an increase in productivity."

“We are taking part in a peer review and have had sessions on business and workforce planning - this has enabled us to look at ourselves in a non-judgmental setting which generates more discussion and input from colleagues. As a result we are developing a plan that will inform our strategy and vision for our future as a local authority.”

Shire district, South West

“We have a clear improvement plan in place as a result of robust internal challenge that has been validated externally.”

Fire and rescue authority, North West

- Another common response was that the use of **benchmarking and data** has enabled **poor performance to be identified and addressed**, for example:

“Best practice and benchmarking has enabled us to better scrutinise abnormal performance and costs and undertake intervention.”

Unitary, East of England

“Benchmarking/analysis ensures that we compare ourselves against others and allows us to explore and ask questions of those authorities who are performing better than ourselves.”

Fire and rescue authority, South East

“Scrutiny focus on very poor street scene performance, using comparative data and best practice research, resulted in high level member-led spotlight that markedly improved performance within a short time. Quarterly performance reports to Cabinet on corporate priority indicators and actions ensure regular focus on key issues and any poor/decreasing performance will be highlighted and addressed.”

London borough

- Some respondents explained that these activities contribute to a **culture of aspiration and continuous improvement** within the authority:

“Performance management, service improvement and personal development are integral to the culture of the council and drive us to continue to achieve better results and outcomes for our residents.”

Shire district, South East

- Others stated that these activities had led to **savings and better use of resources**, for example:

“Scrutiny reviews have identified savings that are helping to protect front line services in the face of budgetary pressures.”

Shire district, South East

“Having member scrutiny provides us with challenge. Our Peer Challenge focussed our attention on areas such as financial planning in the longer term.”

Fire and rescue authority, South East

Economic climate

Respondents were asked whether the ongoing challenging economic climate had affected their authority’s work to strengthen local accountability and drive improvement over the 12 months previous to the survey.

As Table 6 shows, the majority stated that the economic climate had had an impact; however, they were split as to whether this had been positive or negative (15 per cent answered ‘positive’ and 19 per cent ‘negative’). In fact, the most common answer (51 per cent) was that the economic climate had affected this work in both positive and negative ways.

Table 6: In your opinion, has the ongoing challenging economic climate affected your authority's work to strengthen local accountability and drive improvement over the last 12 months?	
	Per cent
Yes - in a negative way	19
Yes - in a positive way	15
Yes - in both positive and negative ways	51
Not at all	11
Don't know	4
Total	100

Base (all respondents): 117

Some respondents provided further explanation of the reasons for their answers. The reasons that were given for positive impacts can be summarised as follows:

- Impetus to **innovate and/or find new improved ways of doing things**, for example:

“the delivery of all services [has] been scrutinised through a newly formed [committee] in order to see how service delivery can be streamlined more efficiently and whether there are joint working opportunities with other councils.”

Shire district, West Midlands

- **Increased drive towards engagement and feedback**, for example:

“We recognise that we need to communicate more with residents and colleagues how we are managing financially... We need to ensure that people know that their contact with us helps to make decisions and drive service improvements.”

Shire district, South West

- **Increased focus on evidence based decisions**, for example:

“External inspection regimes tended to force a focus on what Government wanted to review; local accountability, reinforced by a sound understanding of what matters locally, is being used more effectively to drive service improvements. The diminishing finances of the authority has actually made this more important.”

Unitary, South West

- **Drive to focus on priorities**, for example:

“We just have fewer resources and too many priorities. However this does focus the mind and we have streamlined a lot of our activity as a result. This is a delicate balancing act.”

Shire district, Yorkshire and the Humber

- **Increased focus on achieving and demonstrating value for money**, for example:

“The economic climate has resulted in significant budget reductions, however performance generally has been maintained and public satisfaction with council services is higher. We are probably perceived as running a more efficient and cost effective organisation by the public.”

County, East Midlands

Amongst the respondents that provided an explanation for negative impacts, the primary reason given was the impact that the economic climate has had on resources to undertake accountability and improvement work (both financial and staff time). Some examples of the way in which this has affected authorities are provided below:

“Capacity is very limited the cuts are so great there is little time to have detailed engagement and alternative proposals from the community in some instances.”

Unitary, South West

“Cuts in resourcing levels have reduced our capacity to manage innovative change projects.”

Fire and rescue authority, South West

As Table 6 shows, many authorities have experienced a mixture of both the positive and negative impacts outlined above. Some examples include:

“Need for public engagement and sign-up in order to take the very challenging decisions arising from budget constraints.”

County, South East

“Resources to support improvement scarce. More buy in to getting residents to input into priorities and challenge how the money is spent and which services could be cut.”

Shire district, East Midlands

“Encouraged rigorous service review however, as budgets get tighter, it’s difficult to maintain standards or improve services whilst generating large efficiencies.”

Fire and rescue authority, North East

Skills and capacity for sector-led improvement

In order to gauge levels of confidence in the sector’s capacity to deliver on sector-led improvement, respondents were asked the extent to which they were confident that:

- their own authority had the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve
- the local government sector had the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

Respondents were generally confident in the skills and capacity both of their own authorities and of the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve, although slightly more confident about their own authority than the sector overall. For both individual authorities and the sector more widely, levels of confidence had not changed significantly since the baseline survey.

- Ninety three per cent were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent, significantly higher than 79 per cent for the sector more widely.
- Six per cent were only confident about their own authority to a small extent, whilst no respondents answered ‘not at all’. This is compared to 15 per cent answering ‘to a small extent’ and one per cent ‘not at all’ for the sector more widely.

Table 7: To what extent would you say you are confident that:		
	a) <u>your own authority</u> currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?	b) <u>the local government sector</u> currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?
	Per cent	Per cent
To a great or moderate extent	93	79
To a great extent	39	22
To a moderate extent	54	56
To a small extent	6	15
Not at all	0	1
Don't know	1	6
Total	100	100

Base (all respondents): 117

The sector-led improvement offer from the LGA

Awareness of the approach

Respondents were asked how much, if anything, they had heard about the approach to sector-led improvement in local government. Awareness was high – eighty four per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount – significantly higher than the 59 per cent that had heard at least a moderate amount about ‘Taking the Lead’ (as sector-led improvement was referred to at the time) in the baseline survey.

Table 8: Before today, how much, if anything, had you heard about the approach to sector-led improvement in local government?¹¹

	Per cent 2012	Per cent 2013
Heard a lot or a moderate amount	59	84
Heard a lot	31	54
Heard a moderate amount	28	30
Heard a little	32	13
Heard nothing	8	3
Don't know	1	1
Total	100	100

Base (all respondents): 117 (2013), 137 (2012)

Views on the approach

Those respondents who had heard at least a little about the approach were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “The approach to sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context.”

The majority were supportive, with three quarters (75 per cent) either agreeing or strongly agreeing – the same proportion as in the baseline survey. Of the remaining respondents, the majority were neutral (18 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed), with only four per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the approach.

Table 9: Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: "The approach to sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context."

	Per cent
Agree or strongly agree	75
Strongly agree	22
Agree	53
Neither agree nor disagree	18
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	1
Don't know	4
Total	100

Base (all respondents that had heard a little, a moderate amount or a lot about sector-led improvement, or answered ‘don't know’): 114 (Table 8)

¹¹ The question wording in the baseline survey was “How much, if anything, have you heard about the LGA's 'Taking the Lead' approach to sector-led improvement in local government?”

Awareness of the offer of support

The LGA has offered a number of subsidised or free resources, to support the sector in taking a lead in its own improvement. In order to get an idea about awareness of these resources, respondents were asked which ones they had heard about.

As Table 10 shows, levels of awareness were highest for Knowledge Hub (91 per cent were aware), peer challenge (87 per cent), and LG Inform (83 per cent). These were also the offers with the highest levels of awareness in the baseline survey.

Awareness of nearly all the offers was higher than in the baseline survey, but not to a statistically significant extent. The only exception was awareness of Knowledge Hub, which was significantly higher in this survey – 91 per cent compared to 82 per cent in the baseline.

The lowest levels of awareness were of support for member and officer networks (37 per cent). Four per cent had not heard of any of the resources – similar to the baseline survey.

Table 10: The LGA has offered a number of resources, most of which are free of charge, to support the sector in taking a lead in its own improvement. Which, if any, of the following elements of the LGA's offer have you heard about?

	Per cent 2012	Per cent 2013
Access to the Knowledge Hub , a resource to enable people from all parts of the public sector to work together and share experiences ¹²	82	91
Provision of a " corporate " peer challenge , free of charge, over the three year period starting in April 2011/offer of a free fire peer challenge ¹³	84	87
Access to the LG Inform service , to provide access to key data about the council or fire and rescue service area, and allow benchmarking and comparisons with others ¹⁴	77	83
Member training and development e.g. provision of one subsidised place on the LGA's Leadership Academy for every authority over the three year period from 2011/12	NA	68
Commitment to work with local authorities to develop local accountability tools ¹⁵	47	56
Five days of free member peer support for all authorities undergoing a change of political control	44	51
Supporting member and officer networks , with an immediate focus on children's and adult services	29	37
I have heard of none of these	5	4

Base (all respondents): 117 (2013), 137 (2012)

Please note that percentages sum to more than 100 as respondents could select multiple answers

Impact of the offer of support

Those respondents who had some awareness of the LGA's approach to sector-led improvement and/or of the specific resources offered by the LGA to support this

¹² The baseline survey question read "Development of..." rather than "Access to..."

¹³ In the baseline survey, all respondents were asked about 'corporate peer challenge' whereas in this survey, councils were asked about awareness of corporate peer challenge and fire services were asked about awareness of fire peer challenge.

¹⁴ The baseline survey question read "Development of..." rather than "Access to..."

¹⁵ Note that in this round the following extra text was added: "For example, YouChoose budget simulator, scrutiny support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny."

were asked the extent to which they thought that the support and resources had, to date, had a positive impact on:

- their own authority's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve
- the sector's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

Respondents' views on this were generally very similar for their own authority and the sector more generally. Respondents were positive about the impact of the support and resources to date:

- For both their own authority and the sector as a whole, well over half of respondents thought that the support and resources had had a great or moderate positive impact (58 per cent for their authority and 57 per cent for the sector).
- Only a small proportion thought that there had been no positive impact to date: nine per cent for their authority and four per cent for the sector.

Table 11: To what extent do you think that the support and resources offered by the LGA have, to date, had a positive impact on:

	a) your own authority's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?	b) the sector's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?
	Per cent	Per cent
To a great or moderate extent	58	57
To a great extent	13	7
To a moderate extent	45	50
To a small extent	29	14
Not at all	9	4
Don't know	4	25
Total	100	100

Base (all respondents that had heard a little, a moderate amount or a lot about sector-led improvement (or answered 'don't know') and/or had heard of at least one element of the LGA's offer): 114 (Table 8 and Table 10)

Forty seven respondents thought that the support and resources offered by the LGA had, to date, only had a small positive impact or no positive impact at all, either for their own authority or the sector as a whole. These respondents were asked to suggest any improvements or additional activity that the LGA should provide in order to further support the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Twelve provided responses, and these covered the following issues:

- **Relationship with government:** two respondents said that the LGA could help central government develop a better understanding and perception of local government, whilst another said:

“Some barriers to improvement and efficiency we are finding are with external agencies - government departments, registered social landlords (RSLs) etc. Some work across other players in the public sector would be helpful.”

Shire district, East of England

- **Other suggestions** included: more active facilitation of peer networks; a regional seminar for performance leads to share best practice, continued support for and refinement of LG Inform, and advocating for the importance of the performance function within local authorities.

The role of councillors

In order to inform the LGA’s future support offer, all respondents were then asked to outline what support, if any, they thought that councillors in their authority needed in terms of strengthening their authority’s accountability to local people and further driving improvement locally. Thirty six respondents (31 per cent) provided an answer, and these are summarised below.

- Answers most commonly centred on the need to help councillors **deal with the challenging financial situation**. A number of aspects were covered, including understanding how this impacts on their role as councillor, and how to support communities to build capacity and self-reliance. Other related points were:
 - understanding how to make and communicate difficult decisions, and deal with situations where there is not a position that satisfies all stakeholders
 - a better understanding of the financial situation that authorities are facing and the impact on services, and an understanding of how to make these changes with the least impact on the most vulnerable
 - support to look at alternative approaches to dealing with reduced finances, such as expectation/demand management, behaviour change, increased community and individual resilience and new models of community support.
- Improving their **community engagement** skills and the amount and type of community engagement, as well as understanding the importance of the opinions of residents and why these should inform local authority objectives. Other related points included the importance of listening to the whole community rather than a segment of the community, and the importance of being open and visible and demonstrating their worth to the local community.
- Support to **develop a strategic approach**, moving from being seen as “politically motivated service deliverers to strategically motivated enablers”¹⁶, as well as issues such as balancing a ward focus with an authority-wide strategic view, and mid to long term budget setting spanning outside of their term.
- Other support mentioned included:
 - how to address and/or challenge poor performance

¹⁶ Shire district, South East

- how to understand performance management data
- raising awareness of the importance of accountability and the benefits for local authorities.

Further comments on sector-led improvement

All respondents were then invited to provide any final comments they had on the current approach to sector-led improvement and the support offer to the sector from the LGA. A small number of respondents (19 per cent) provided comments. These covered the following issues:

- Some **welcomed the approach** and praised its usefulness, for example: “Personally I have found it a very valuable tool which encourages self-reflection, learning and improvement”.¹⁷ However one respondent said “it can feel quite absent/remote”.¹⁸
- Others **praised specific aspects of the offer from the LGA**. For example: “We had a very positive experience of the peer challenge. I have done two peer challenges and see the benefit for the host authority, my own council and my own development.”¹⁹ One respondent said “peer challenge should be a rolling programme and continue beyond 2014”.²⁰
- A small number voiced concerns about how the approach works for less well performing authorities or those unwilling to engage, for example:

“...it's great for the decent performers but what about those that have low ambition and indeed low performance? ...There needs to be more of a push that all councils HAVE to have a peer review.”

Shire district, West Midlands

“I have no concerns about the LGA's offer itself and I strongly support the sector taking the lead in improvement. However, I do not believe it is sufficient... Independent scrutiny, with teeth, is needed, especially when resources are tightening and tough decisions are being made as the capacity and capability of the sector to drive its own performance remains very variable.”

London borough

- Finally, suggestions for the approach going forwards included:

“I would recommend that the LGA consider adopting or promoting established methodologies that support service improvement.”

Shire district, South West

¹⁷ Unitary, North West

¹⁸ Shire district, East of England

¹⁹ County, South West

²⁰ Shire district, West Midlands

“It needs to be pushed more strongly by the LGA and publicised more widely.”

County, East Midlands

“Scope for provision of better centrally-led benchmarking information/performance data to aid in robust scrutiny and challenge.”

Fire and rescue authority, North West

“I think a more proactive approach is necessary and one that can link central government departments with each other and with local authorities.”

Metropolitan district, Yorkshire and the Humber

“Better co-ordination [for LG Inform] with CIPFA Value for Money (VfM) Toolkit and how Audit Commission tools can contribute to this... produce a gap analysis of what is within the Audit Commission VfM tools and the CIPFA tool. Importantly, standardised indicators (although not forgetting that local determination and priorities should remain on the agenda).”

Unitary, East of England

“LGA approach is very good and we gained a lot from our peer review. My concern is how the LGA might realise the necessary capacity to be able to apply themselves across the full sector and provide sufficient support resources.”

Shire district, South East

Annex A: Questionnaire

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please note that this link is unique to you – please do not forward it on to colleagues as their response will overwrite your own.

The survey is essential to allow the Local Government Association (LGA), which is working on behalf of your authority, to understand how local authorities are monitoring their own performance and seeking to improve services and be locally accountable.

Throughout the survey the phrases 'local authority' and 'local government' have been used – please note that these refer to both councils and fire and rescue services.

You can navigate through the questions using the arrows at the bottom of each page. Use the back arrow at the bottom of the page if you wish to amend your response to an earlier question.

If you stop before completing the return, you can come back to this page using the link supplied in the email and you will be able to continue where you left off. To ensure your answers have been saved, click on the 'page forward' arrow at the bottom of the page that you were working on before exiting.

Background

1. Please amend the details we have on record if necessary:

Your name:

Your local authority:

Role/job title:

Email address:

Local accountability

2. Listed below are a number of activities that local authorities might conduct to strengthen local accountability and to engage with residents to set local priorities. As far as you are aware, does your authority conduct, or plan to conduct, any of the following activities?

Please select one answer option for each activity

(Answer options will be: yes - we are doing this currently or have done in the last 12 months, yes - we plan to do this within the next 12 months, no current plans to do this, don't know)

- Publishing performance information annually or more often, in a format and style that can be easily accessed and understood by residents

- Using a budget simulation tool (for example, YouChoose or Delib Budget Simulator) to get feedback on spending priorities
- In depth participatory budgeting exercises to inform local spending decisions
- Opening a dialogue with residents to get their views on current performance (this could be through various mediums including face to face and online)
- Publishing expenditure online (not including spend over £500, senior salaries or any other expenditure that must be published as a requirement of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Transparency)
- Encouraging feedback on local authority performance via various channels such as the website, feedback forms and face to face
- Using social media to communicate with residents
- Using citizens' juries (or other deliberative techniques) to inform local decisions
- Consulting on particular proposals to get feedback and ideas
- Conducting resident surveys or panel surveys to get feedback
- Use of neighbourhood or area-based panels
- Other (please specify)

If 'yes - we are doing this currently or have done in the last 12 months' to one or more option above:

3. Please briefly describe what, if any, positive outcomes these activities have had in terms of the service you have been able to provide for your local community.

To all:

4. Please see below for a scale depicting different levels of local accountability and engagement with residents.
 - a. Please tick the box that **most closely** describes your local authority.
 - b. Please tick the box that **most closely** describes what your local authority aspires to.

	Please tick the box that most closely describes your local authority	Please tick the box that most closely describes what your local authority aspires to.
No 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity from politicians and senior staff. The level of activity does <u>not</u> meet the minimum requirements of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Low level of 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity amongst politicians and senior staff. The level of activity meets the minimum requirements of the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Moderate level of 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity amongst politicians and senior staff. Activities to achieve local accountability and engagement are undertaken, but on an ad hoc basis across a small number of service areas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
High level of 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity amongst politicians and senior staff. Local accountability and engagement are seen as important and efforts are made to ensure that a variety of steps are taken to achieve this.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local accountability and engagement are seen by politicians and senior staff as strategic issues of high priority. Local accountability and engagement activities are integrated throughout the local authority's operations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. We are reviewing our support offer to councils on local accountability. It would be helpful to know whether your authority needs further support on local accountability and if so what would be helpful. Please provide any details below.

6. As part of this work we would also like to gather some case study examples. If you have any examples of recent initiatives to strengthen local accountability in your authority that you would like to share with the sector, please provide brief details below.

Only a short description is needed – we will contact you for further details

Driving improvement

7. In the context of a reduced burden of inspection and the absence of top down performance management from central government (apart from inspection in high risk areas like safeguarding and the annual audit process), please indicate below which steps, if any, your authority is taking to understand performance and drive improvement.

Please note that improvement can include maintaining service levels or service user outcomes in the face of a reduction in resources, as this requires an increase in productivity.

Please select one answer option for each row

(Answer options will be: yes - we are doing this currently or have done in the last 12 months, yes - we plan to do this within the next 12 months, no current plans to do this, don't know)

- Challenge from peers in other authorities and partner organisations
- Sharing information and best practice with others
- Analysis and benchmarking of performance data
- Developing leadership skills
- Using scrutiny to challenge and improve local authority services
- Self assessment activity over and above standard internal audit
- Encouraging councillors and officers to participate in learning and support networks and relevant professional associations
- Peer mentoring and support from external authorities
- Other (please specify)

If 'yes - we are doing this currently or have done in the last 12 months' to one or more option above:

8. Please briefly give examples of what, if any, positive outcomes these activities have had in terms of enabling your authority to improve the services you provide for your local community.

To all:

9. In your opinion, has the ongoing challenging economic climate affected your authority's work to strengthen local accountability and drive improvement over the last 12 months?

Yes – in a negative way

Yes – in a positive way

Yes – in both positive and negative ways

Not at all

Don't know

If 'yes – in a negative way', 'yes – in a positive way', or 'yes – in both positive and negative ways':

10. Please use the space below to provide an explanation of how the economic climate has impacted on your authority's work to strengthen local accountability and drive improvement. Please also highlight if the scale or type of impact has changed over time.

Skills and capacity for sector-led improvement

11. To what extent would you say you are confident that:

- a) Your own authority currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?
- b) The local government sector currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?

	a) Your own authority	b) The local government sector
To a great extent		
To a moderate extent		
To a small extent		
Not at all		
Don't know		

The sector-led improvement offer from the LGA

12. Before today, how much, if anything, had you heard about the approach to sector-led improvement in local government?

(Answer options will be: 'heard a lot', 'heard a moderate amount', 'heard a little', 'heard nothing' or 'don't know')

To everyone apart from those that answered 'heard nothing':

13. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"The approach to sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context"

(Answer options will be: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree', 'don't know')

To all:

14. The LGA has offered a number of resources, most of which are free of charge, to support the sector in taking the lead in its own improvement. Which, if any, of the following elements of the LGA's offer have you heard about?

Please tick all that apply

- Commitment to work with local authorities to develop **local accountability tools** e.g. YouChoose budget simulator, scrutiny support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny
- **To be asked to everyone apart from fire authorities:** Provision of a "corporate" **peer challenge**, free of charge, over the three year period starting in April 2011
- **For fire authorities only:** Offer of a free **fire peer challenge**

- Five days of free member **peer support** for all authorities undergoing a change of political control
- Access to the **Knowledge Hub**, a resource to enable people from all parts of the public sector to work together and share experiences
- Access to the **LG Inform** service, to provide access to key data about the council or fire and rescue service area, and allow benchmarking and comparisons with others
- **Member training and development** e.g. provision of one subsidised place on the LGA's Leadership Academy for every authority over the three year period from 2011/12
- Supporting **member and officer networks**, with an immediate focus on children's and adult services
- I have heard of none of these

*Ask to everyone apart from those who ticked 'heard nothing' in Q12 **and** ticked 'I have heard of none of these' in Q14*

15. To what extent do you think that the support and resources offered by the LGA have, to date, had a positive impact on:

a) your own authority's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?

b) the sector's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?

	a) Your own authority	b) The local government sector
To a great extent		
To a moderate extent		
To a small extent		
Not at all		
Don't know		

To those that answered 'to a small extent' or 'not at all' for their own authority or the sector in Q15:

16. Please use the space below to briefly outline any improvements or additional activity that you think the LGA should provide in order to further support your authority and/or the sector's capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

To all:

17. Please use the space below to outline what support, if any, you think that councillors in your authority need in terms of strengthening your council's accountability to local people and further driving improvement locally.

18. If there is anything else you would like to say about the approach to sector-led improvement and the support offer to the sector from the LGA, please use the space below.



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We consider requests on an individual basis.