

Evaluation of sector-led improvement

Final report

May 2014



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Summary

This report outlines the findings from the Local Government Association (LGA) evaluation of sector-led improvement.

As a result of LGA lobbying, the new Coalition Government moved quickly to abolish many aspects of the previous top down performance framework, including the comprehensive area assessment, the organisational assessment, Local Area Agreements and Government Office monitoring, the annual assessment of adult social services and, subsequently, the annual assessment of children's services.

The Government argued that the assessment regime was simply no longer affordable in the current economic climate (the National Audit Office estimated the cost of monitoring local government at £2bn); that external inspection had reached the point of diminishing returns and that greater weight should instead be placed on local accountability, in tune with its localism agenda.

At the same time the LGA and councils worked together to develop a new approach to improvement. 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.

Sector-led improvement 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.

The evaluation ran over a two year period up until early 2014, 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.

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

A further key aim of the evaluation was to provide information that will enable the LGA to continue to refine and improve the approach and support offer to the sector.

The key findings from the evaluation are summarised below under each of the evaluation objectives. The main pieces of research drawn upon are:

- Time series data analysis of key performance metrics for local government.
- A series of telephone polls of representative random samples of approximately 1,000 British adults (aged 18 or over) carried out quarterly between September 2012 and January 2014.
- A telephone survey of senior members and officers conducted over the course of October and November 2013. A baseline survey of this group was conducted in October and November 2012.
- An online survey of heads of policy and performance conducted in October 2013. A baseline survey of this group was conducted over the course of May and June 2012.
- A 'perceptions audit' comprising in-depth interviews with 15 key stakeholders from organisations including government departments, regulators and inspectorates during October and November 2013. A baseline perceptions audit was conducted over the course of June and July 2012.
- An online survey of directors of adult social services, conducted in December 2013, with a baseline survey conducted in November 2012.
- An online survey of lead members for adult social services, conducted in January 2014, with a baseline survey conducted in January 2013.
- An online survey of directors of children's services, conducted in January 2014, with a baseline survey conducted in February 2013.
- An online survey of lead members for children's services, conducted in March 2014, with a baseline survey conducted in March 2013.
- Evaluations of the individual offers of LGA support for sector-led improvement.

Key messages

The overall message from the evaluation is positive.

- Residents remain satisfied with and continue to trust their local council, despite the increasing financial constraints being faced by the sector.
- An objective assessment of local government performance across the full range of local government activity demonstrates that councils are continuing to improve performance, with nearly three quarters of the metrics demonstrating improvement since 2010.
- Further, the sector-led improvement approach and offer of support from the LGA has been welcomed and valued by councils, and there is a high level of confidence within the sector in its capacity to monitor its own performance and improve.

The results suggest that it would be beneficial to further inform external stakeholders about the benefits of sector-led improvement in practice.

The key messages are outlined below, followed by a summary of progress against the four evaluation objectives. Please note that differences in survey results between groups or over time are only highlighted as significant if the difference is statistically significant.

Stronger local accountability: The public polling shows that, since September 2012, councils have maintained performance on a number of indicators such as keeping people informed, responsiveness to residents' concerns, trust and satisfaction, which, taken together, give an insight into levels of local accountability across the sector.

In addition, senior members and officers were positive about accountability in their own authority, with more than nine out of ten leaders and chief executives agreeing that this was strong.

Senior officials from government departments and inspectorates had increased confidence in the theory of sector-led improvement and local accountability since the baseline interviews in 2012, although now expressed a desire to see more evidence of it working in practice.

Improved performance: Analysis of a series of 97 metrics across the full range of local government activity, carried out to provide an objective assessment of local government performance since 2010, demonstrates a positive direction of travel, with nearly three quarters of these metrics having seen an improvement since 2010.

Moreover, an independent evaluation of sector-led improvement compared to central government intervention, for turning round a council that is visibly failing, concluded that a sector-led approach is better in supporting councils in their improvement journey, all else being equal.

Councils owning the approach to sector-led improvement: Within the sector there are high levels of awareness of the approach to improvement and confidence in the ability of the sector to improve, as well as evidence of improvement.

Helpfulness of the LGA support offer: There is also evidence to demonstrate that, as well as high levels of awareness of the LGA's offer in the sector, councils have valued the support the LGA is making available and that it has been helpful to their improvement journey.

The support being provided is significant, for example:

- By the end of 2014, more than 350 peer challenges will have been delivered to councils.

"It has changed the way the council works....

We might have got there in the end but without the challenge team there would have been a longer period of muddle. We wouldn't have got there as quickly and the emphasis on change wouldn't have been as clear as it is now."

Council Leader

- The Centre for Public Scrutiny provides a range of support including producing policy briefings and practice guides and providing both helpdesk support and more in depth support to local authorities.

- LG Inform – a free online data service which provides performance and finance data to councils and the public – had 1,755 registered users in February 2014.

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

Cabinet Member

- Knowledge Hub – a web based service to help people connect, share and learn from each other – had 59,034 visits from 27,680 unique visitors during February 2014.
- Since 2011/12, a total of 327 councillors have received in depth leadership development support through attendance at the Leadership Academy.

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

Council Leader

- Tailored support programmes are being delivered for specific services areas, including adult social care and children’s services.

Changes over time: Changes over the course of the evaluation include:

- a significant increase in the proportion of residents who trust their local council, as opposed to central government, to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area²
- improved performance across a range of measures of performance and service quality, across the full range of local government activity
- increased awareness of individual aspects of the support offer, particularly amongst council leaders
- increased take up of the LGA’s support offer
- increased confidence in the approach amongst senior officials from government departments and the inspectorates.

Progress against objectives

The key findings from the evaluation are summarised below under each of the evaluation objectives, pulling together the findings of the various strands of research conducted for the evaluation.

² This change was observed over the period since the question was first asked in July 2013.

Does the approach to sector-led improvement have the confidence of the sector and the government, and the trust of the public?

Corporate sector-led improvement

Public polling has been undertaken to monitor the impact of sector-led improvement on public views of councils. This found that levels of public trust in councils have been maintained since the first round of polling in September 2012, when 61 per cent said that they trust their council a great deal or a fair amount – the most recent figure (January 2014) remains at 61 per cent.

Whilst many factors will impact on levels of trust in councils, this shows that, to date, the replacement of much of the top down performance management and assessments with a sector-led improvement approach has not had a negative impact in this regard.

Further, when asked who they trust most to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area – their local council or the government – the vast majority of respondents said that, of the two, they trusted their local council most (77 per cent). This proportion has increased significantly from 70 per cent when the question was first asked in July 2013.

Awareness of the sector-led improvement approach within local government was generally high:

- In the survey of senior members and officers, chief executives had a high level of awareness of sector-led improvement (87 per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount), awareness amongst leaders was lower but still fairly high (60 per cent – with a further 27 per cent having heard a little), and for chairs of scrutiny was lower (34 per cent – with a further 32 per cent having heard a little).³ Levels of awareness for these groups have remained fairly stable since the baseline survey in 2012, although there was an increase in awareness amongst leaders.
- Eighty four per cent of respondents to the survey of heads of policy and performance had heard a lot or a moderate amount about the approach; significantly higher than the 2012 baseline survey.

Those who were aware of the sector-led improvement approach were supportive. Both surveys asked all those who had heard at least a little whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “The approach to sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context.”

- Eighty per cent of those chief executives who were aware of sector-led improvement agreed or strongly agreed it is the right approach. The proportion of leaders and chairs of scrutiny agreeing were 68 per cent and 64 per cent respectively.
- For chief executives and chairs of scrutiny, the majority of remaining respondents were neutral (13 per cent and 24 per cent respectively). Leaders were more evenly balanced, with 14 per cent neutral and 13 per cent disagreeing that it is the right approach.

³ Chairs of scrutiny were included in the survey due to the important role that scrutiny plays in accountability. As may be expected, their results tend to be lower than that observed for leaders and chief executives, who will generally have more in depth contact with and knowledge of the concept of sector-led improvement and the breadth of support offered by the LGA.

- Seventy five per cent of heads of policy and performance agreed or strongly agreed – the same proportion as in the baseline survey. Of the remaining respondents, the majority were neutral (18 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed).

"It is invaluable to us to have access to numerous ideas and good practice about how to approach many of the challenges that we face."

Performance Manager

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 six per cent of leaders were either moderately or greatly confident that their authority has the skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Chief executives and chairs of scrutiny were also confident (94 per cent and 85 per cent respectively).
- For the overall sector, 88 per cent of leaders, 82 per cent of chief executives and 76 per cent of chairs of scrutiny were at least moderately confident in the level of skills and capacity.
- Ninety three per cent of heads of policy and performance were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent, compared to 79 per cent with confidence in the sector. Levels of confidence had not changed significantly since the baseline survey.

Interviews with senior officials from government departments and inspectorates demonstrated they had increased confidence in the theory of sector-led improvement and local accountability since the baseline interviews in 2012. However, they expressed a desire to see more evidence of sector-led improvement working in practice. In particular they wanted examples of authorities who have had poor performance turned around, proof that all authorities engage with sector-led improvement and that poor performers cannot avoid engagement, and evidence that comparable performance and other information (including peer challenges) is published and available to drive improvement and local accountability.

Adult social care

For adult social care, awareness of the Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care (TEASC) programme and the approach it has developed to sector-led improvement was very high amongst adult social care directors (99 per cent had heard at least a moderate amount). Awareness amongst lead members for adult social care had increased significantly since the baseline, with 82 per cent now saying that they had heard at least a moderate amount.

For both lead members and directors, the majority who were aware of the approach agreed that it was the right one in the current context. Seventy nine per cent of directors agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 16 per cent were neutral. Seventy one per cent of those lead members who were aware agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 23 per cent were neutral.

"In general we are very supportive of the sector-led improvement approach and feel it will support improvements in adult social care, particularly with the changes outlined in the care bill. A common approach that shares good practice and builds strong relationships will provide for a healthier care system."

Director of Adult Social Care

Respondents tended to be confident in the skills and capacity of both their own authority and of the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Ninety six per cent of directors and 94 per cent of lead members were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent, compared to 88 per cent of directors and 70 per cent of lead members for the sector.

Children's services

Responsibility for sector-led improvement in children's services previously rested with the Children's Improvement Board (CIB). However, in April 2013 the Department for Education withdrew its funding to CIB. Important elements of CIB's previous work programme are now being taken forward by the LGA as part of its sector-led improvement offer to councils and the three organisations on CIB⁴ are continuing to work together in partnership to support improvement.

Awareness of the approach to supporting sector-led improvement in children's services post-CIB was fairly high amongst directors of children's services; 82 per cent of respondents had heard a lot or a moderate amount. Awareness amongst lead members for children's services was more varied; 62 per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount about this, whilst a further 27 per cent had heard a little.

For both lead members and directors, the majority who were aware of the approach agreed that it is the right one in the current context – 60 per cent of directors and 61 per cent of lead members strongly agreed or agreed. Of the remaining respondents, most were neutral (29 per cent of directors and 30 per cent of lead members neither agreed nor disagreed). As may be expected following the withdrawal of funding, levels of agreement were lower than when respondents were asked the same question about the CIB approach in the baseline survey, although this was reflected in an increase in the proportion of respondents answering 'neither agree nor disagree' rather than an increase in active disagreement.

"It has to make sense that sector leaders, who understand the service issues in a real up to date sense, are used to judge how well others are doing."

Director of Children's Services

As with adult social care, respondents tended to be confident in the skills and capacity of both their own children's services department and of the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Ninety six per cent of directors and 96 per cent of lead members were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent, compared to 84 per cent of directors and 69 per cent of lead members for the sector.⁵

Has the sector been able to strengthen local accountability?

Corporate sector-led improvement

Respondents to the survey of senior members and officers were positive about accountability in their authority, with 97 per cent of chief executives and 96 per cent of leaders either agreeing or

⁴ The LGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).

⁵ Although lead members were noticeably more confident about their own authority than the sector in general, this was partly due to a higher proportion (15 per cent) answering 'don't know' for the sector.

strongly agreeing with the statement “local accountability is strong in my authority”. Chairs of scrutiny were also positive, with 76 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Further, the survey of heads of policy and performance showed high levels of engagement and accountability activities such as consulting on proposals to get feedback and ideas (94 per cent of respondent’s authorities were doing this) and using social media to communicate with residents (91 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 an increase in publishing expenditure data online⁶: 61 per cent of respondent’s authorities were doing this, compared to 47 per cent that were doing so in the baseline survey.

“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.”
Performance Director

The survey also identified that councils aspire to continuous improvement: 61 per cent of respondents said that their authority aspired to improve their level of local accountability and engagement.

The public polling shows that, since September 2012, councils have maintained performance on three indicators which, taken together, give an insight in to levels of local accountability across the sector:

- In the January 2014 polling, 66 per cent of respondents said that their council keeps them very or fairly well informed about the services and benefits it provides – the same proportion who said this in September 2012.
- Respondent’s satisfaction with the way their local council runs things has also remained stable since the polling started, with a high level of satisfaction at January 2014 – 70 per cent were very or fairly satisfied.
- In January 2014, 61 per cent said that their local council acts on the concerns of local residents a fair amount or a great deal – similar to the 62 per cent who said this in September 2012.

Adult social care

The survey of directors of adult social care found, as at December 2013, 91 per cent of respondents’ authorities had produced a local account for 2011/12 and/or 2012/13. Ninety four per cent of these respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements:

- “My council’s local account acknowledges the areas requiring improvement and describes the actions to be taken.”
- “My council’s local account is based on a robust and reasonable self-assessment.”

⁶ This was expenditure data in addition to that required to be published by the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency (which recommends publishing spend over £500 and senior salaries, for example).

However there was aspiration to do better – 64 per cent of directors thought their authority aspires to improve their level of local accountability and engagement with adult social care service users and carers.

Ninety per cent of lead members for adult social care agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “accountability to and engagement with adult social care service users and carers is strong in my authority”.

Children’s services

Directors for children’s services reported that common activities to strengthen local accountability and engage with children’s service users to set local priorities were: opening a dialogue with children and young people to get their views on current performance and to improve local services (88 per cent were doing this); and consulting on particular proposals to get feedback and ideas (82 per cent).

The results suggest that, overall, children’s services departments have maintained their level of local accountability activities, with little significant change since the baseline survey. The only exception to this was consulting on particular proposals to get feedback and ideas – although the proportion doing this remains high at 82 per cent, this is lower than in the baseline survey (93 per cent). However it is worth noting that a further 12 per cent did plan to do this within the next 12 months.

Further, 67 per cent of directors thought that their authorities aspired to improve their level of accountability and engagement with children’s service users.

Eight five per cent of lead members for children’s services agreed or strongly agree with the statement “accountability to and engagement with children’s service users is strong in my authority”.

Is the sector adopting the sector-led improvement approach and continuing to improve?⁷

Corporate sector-led improvement

The survey of senior members and officers revealed a high level of confidence amongst this group around improvement work in their authorities – 99 per cent of chief executives and 98 per cent of leaders either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my authority is making advances in driving improvement”. Chairs of scrutiny were also positive, with 81 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing.

This confidence is borne out by the data analysis of key performance metrics. Analysis of a series of 97 metrics, across the full range of local government activity, was carried out to provide an objective assessment of local government performance since 2010. This showed a positive direction of travel, with just under three quarters of these metrics having seen an improvement since 2010. Of the remaining metrics, just under one tenth had not changed whilst a fifth had seen a negative change. Where there were negative directions of travel they tended not to be grouped in the same service areas, which is a positive sign: any clustering within service areas may have been indicative of more systemic problems.

⁷ Please note that this evaluation defines improvement 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.

Respondents to the survey of heads of policy and performance reported a number of steps their authorities were taking to understand performance and drive improvement. 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), and analysis and benchmarking of performance data (83 per cent).

Authorities have maintained their level of improvement activity since the baseline survey in 2012, 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.

“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.”

Head of Performance Management

Adult social care

Adult social care directors' departments were undertaking a number of activities to understand performance and drive improvement. The most common were sharing information and innovative practice with others (96 per cent of respondents' authorities were doing this) and analysis and benchmarking of performance data (also 96 per cent).

Ninety seven per cent of respondents to the survey of lead members for adult social care agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my authority's adult social care department is making advances in driving improvement”.

Children's services

Directors' of children's services departments were undertaking a number of activities to understand performance and drive improvement. As with adult social care, the most common were analysis and benchmarking of performance data (93 per cent) and sharing information and innovative practice with others (92 per cent).

Ninety six per cent of respondents to the survey of lead members for children's services agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my authority's children's services department is making advances in driving improvement”.

Have the tools offered to the sector had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself?

Corporate sector-led improvement

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

- In the survey of senior members and officers, awareness varied between the three groups of respondents, with chief executives tending to have the highest levels of awareness.
- The offers that leaders and chief executives were most commonly aware of were peer challenge (100 per cent of chief executives and 89 per cent of leaders were aware) and member training and development (97 per cent of chief executives and 93 per cent of leaders). The two offers which chairs of scrutiny were most aware of were member training and development (83 per cent) and the commitment to work with local authorities to develop local accountability tools (58 per cent).
- Awareness of individual aspects of the offer of support had improved in several cases since the baseline, particularly amongst leaders.
- The survey of heads of policy and performance revealed high levels of awareness amongst this group. Levels of awareness were highest for Knowledge Hub (91 per cent), peer challenge (87 per cent), and LG Inform (83 per cent).
- Awareness of nearly all the offers amongst this group 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 the latest survey (91 per cent were aware compared to 82 per cent in the baseline).

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

- In the survey of senior members and officers, 93 per cent of leaders who were aware of the offer, 93 per cent of chief executives and 76 per cent of chairs of scrutiny said that the support and resources offered had had a positive impact on their authority.
- Ninety five per cent of chief executives who were aware of the offer, 86 per cent of leaders and 73 per cent of chairs of scrutiny thought that the support and resources offered had had a positive impact on the sector more generally.
- Eighty seven per cent of respondents to the survey of heads of policy and performance who were aware of the offer thought that the support and resources had had a positive impact on their authority. Seventy one per cent said this for the sector.

Adult social care

Respondents who had some awareness of TEASC and its approach to sector-led improvement in adult social care were asked the extent to which they thought that the support and resources offered by TEASC had, to date, had a positive impact on the capacity of adult social care, both within their own authority and across the local government sector as a whole, to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

- Respondents were positive about this – 93 per cent of directors for adult social care thought that the support and resources had had a positive impact on their authority, whilst 83 per cent thought this for the sector.
- Eighty three per cent of lead members for adult social care thought that the support and resources had had a positive impact on their authority, whilst 67 per cent thought this for the sector.

Children’s services

Respondents who had some awareness of the approach and support offer that has been developed to support sector-led improvement in children's services were asked the extent to which they thought that this would have a positive impact on the capacity of children’s services, both within their own authority and across the local government sector as a whole, to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.⁸

The majority were positive about the likely impact of the approach:

- Ninety three per cent of directors for children’s services thought that there would be a positive impact on their children’s services department, whilst 92 per cent thought that there would be a positive impact for the sector.
- Eighty eight per cent of lead members for children’s services thought that there would be a positive impact on their children’s services department, whilst 74 per cent thought that there would be a positive impact for the sector.

The main body of the report looks at the impact of the individual offers in more detail.

Conclusions and next steps

This evaluation demonstrates the success of the sector-led approach to improvement in local government. Councils are continuing to improve their performance and public satisfaction with and trust in councils is high. Moreover, councils value the support being provided by the LGA and find it helpful to their improvement journey.

The LGA will continue to keep its support offer under review so that it helps councils meet the growing and changing challenges they face, and to evaluate its effectiveness.

Further details are available here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement>

⁸ Unlike the corporate and adult social care surveys, this question asked about expected rather than achieved impact, as the recent changes to the programme of support following withdrawal of CIB funding mean it is too soon to judge impact.

Evaluation of sector-led improvement

The remainder of the report outlines the full set of results from the evaluation of sector-led improvement.

Sector-led improvement

As a result of LGA lobbying, the new Coalition Government moved quickly to abolish many aspects of the previous top down performance framework, including the comprehensive area assessment, the organisational assessment, Local Area Agreements and Government Office monitoring, the annual assessment of adult social services and, subsequently, the annual assessment of children's services.

The Government argued that the assessment regime was simply no longer affordable in the current economic climate (the National Audit Office estimated the cost of monitoring local government at £2bn); that external inspection had reached the point of diminishing returns; and that greater weight should instead be placed on local accountability, in tune with its localism agenda.

At the same time the LGA and councils worked together to develop a new approach to improvement. 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"⁹ 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

⁹ <http://www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement>

- utilising transparent and comparable performance information
- investing in leadership.

Because of the particular issues and challenges that can arise in these services, specific offers have been developed to support sector-led improvement in children's and adults' services, as well as in several other areas such as planning and health and wellbeing. More detail about the programmes of support is set out here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement>

The evaluation

In November 2011, the LGA's Improvement Board approved the specification for an evaluation of sector-led improvement. The evaluation ran 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 further key aim of the evaluation was to provide information that will enable the LGA to continue to refine and improve the approach and support offer to the sector. Sector-led improvement has changed considerably over the course of the evaluation and will continue to do so, with offers of support being developed in an increasing number of service areas. The outputs from this evaluation will contribute to future improvements and developments, and the LGA will continue to improve and refine the offer through ongoing review.

A baseline report was published in February 2013. In addition, a number of companion reports, have been published alongside the main evaluation reports, looking at specific issues in more detail. A list of companion reports can be found at Annex A. In addition, all outputs of the evaluation, including the baseline report and the companion reports, can be found here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>.

The evaluation consists of two parts:

- overall evaluation of the **approach**
- evaluation of the LGA's **offer** of support to the sector.

To ensure a comprehensive assessment of sector-led improvement as a whole, elements of this evaluation have been expanded to include questions about sector-led improvement in adult social care and children's services. In addition, some further evaluation activity is being undertaken independently in these service areas, as well as in other areas such as health and wellbeing. Annex A signposts to the outputs from these additional evaluation activities.

Please note that, throughout the report, differences in survey results between groups or over time are only highlighted as significant if the difference is statistically significant.

Evaluating the approach to sector-led improvement

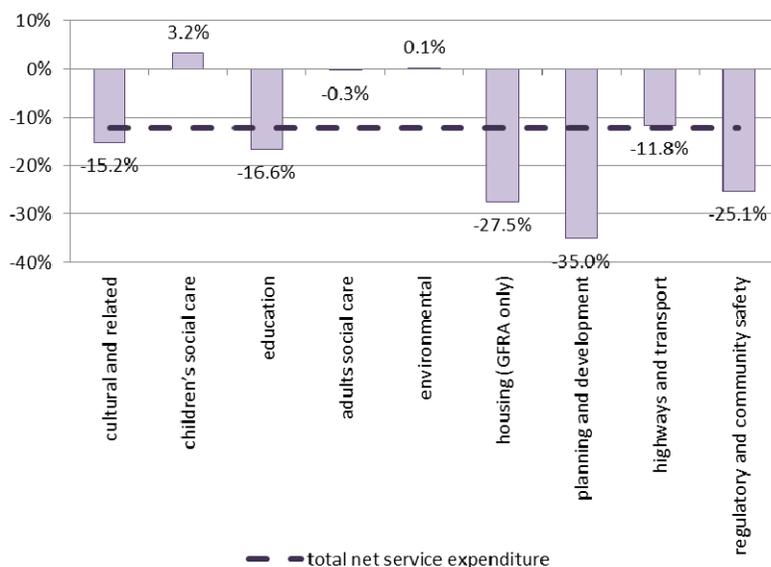
Data analysis

Analysis of a selection of key metrics covering the full range of local government activity was conducted to give a broad objective assessment of sector performance and how this has changed in recent years. The full analysis can be found in Companion Report G.

When considering the performance of the local government sector over the past few years it is important to keep in mind the scale of the budgetary restraints that most services are experiencing.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the only services that have not experienced a reduction in the cash net expenditure figure are children's social care and environmental services, and even these have experienced sizable real terms cuts due to the small increases in expenditure.

Figure 1: Percentage change in net service expenditure between 2009-10 and 2012-13



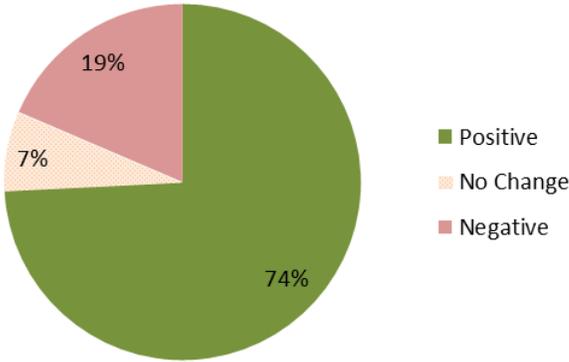
Source: DCLG Revenue Outturn Summary

In order to give an overview of the performance of the sector, the data examined was a series of 97 key metrics across broad service areas (which also reflect the LGA's board structures). These were:

- culture, tourism and sport (for example, percentage of adults participating in sport and active recreation)
- children and young people (for example, percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs, or equivalent, at grades A*-C)
- community wellbeing (for example, proportion of over 65s who were still at home 91 days after discharge from hospital into reablement/rehabilitation services)
- environment and housing (for example, percentage of household waste recycled)
- economy and transport (for example, principal roads where maintenance should be considered)
- safer and stronger communities (for example, adult reoffending rates)
- workforce and finance (for example, council tax collected as a percentage of that due).

Analysis of these metrics, across the full range of local government activity, showed a positive direction of travel overall, with just under three quarters of these metrics having seen an improvement since 2010. Of the remaining metrics, just under one tenth had not changed whilst a fifth had seen a negative change.

Figure 2: Direction of travel of all key metrics: most recent compared to 2010

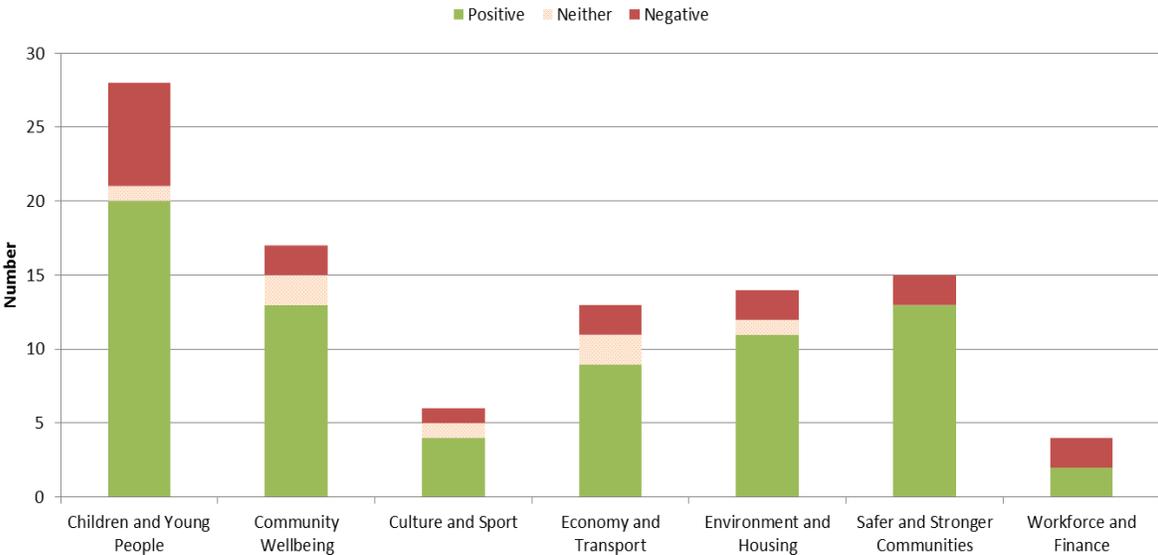


Base: 97 metrics

Since 2010 there has been consistent positive direction of travel across the sector, with economy and transport, safer and stronger communities and environment and housing metrics all showing strong improvements.

Figure 3 provides an overview of sector performance by broad service area, comparing the most recent period with 2010. For each service it shows the number of metrics that have seen a positive change, negative change or no change since 2010.

Figure 3: Direction of travel for key performance metrics by board: most recent compared to 2010



Where there were negative directions of travel they tended not to be grouped in the same service areas, which is a positive sign: any clustering within service areas may have been indicative of more systemic problems.

Members of the public

Councillors are elected to represent and serve their local communities. The views of local people are therefore of the utmost importance.

Measuring the impact of sector-led improvement on the public is not easy, partly because individuals vary in the extent to which they use and are aware of local government services, but also because they would be unlikely to recognise the terminology or the approach. However, at the simplest level, it can be argued that sector-led improvement is successful if public trust in local government remains the same or improves, despite the replacement of much of the top down performance management and assessments with sector self-monitoring and improvement.

Outlined below are the results from a series of telephone polls of representative random samples of approximately 1,000 British adults (aged 18 or over) carried out quarterly between September 2012 and January 2014 by Populus Data Solutions. Where the difference between two years is statistically significant this is stated. For a full description of the methodology and further analysis, please see ‘Polling on resident satisfaction with councils: January 2014’¹⁰.

Trust in local government

Levels of trust in councils have been stable since this polling started in September 2012. In the most recent round, 61 per cent of respondents stated that they trusted their council a great deal or a fair amount.

	Sept 2012	Jan 2013	Apr 2013	July 2013	Oct 2013	Jan 2014
	%	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal or fair amount	61	62	60	61	61	61

Base (all respondents): 1,006 British adults in September, 1,004 in January, 1,036 in April, 1,002 in July, 1,003 in October, 1,008 in January 2014

Further, when asked who they trust most to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area – their local council or the government – the vast majority of respondents said that, of the two, they trusted their local council most (77 per cent). This proportion has increased significantly since the question was first asked in July 2013.

	July 2013	Oct 2013	Jan 2014
	%	%	%
Your local council(s)	70	71	77
The government	14	11	13
Neither	13	16	8
Don't know	3	2	2

Base (all respondents): 1,002 British adults in July, 1,003 in October, 1,008 in January

¹⁰ <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>

¹¹ The full response scale was: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, not at all, don't know.

¹² 'Neither' was not read out to respondents as an answer option but the interviewer could code it if it was given spontaneously.

Local accountability

The following questions explore the extent to which the public feel they are able to influence their local council, as a measure of local accountability. This is important because a key principle of sector-led improvement is that stronger accountability helps local people drive improvement.

Although it is challenging to ask residents directly about influence in a way that provides a meaningful response, research suggests strong links between feelings of influence and other factors that polling is more able to provide robust results for. These are:

- the extent to which residents feel informed
- overall satisfaction with the local authority
- the extent to which it is felt the local authority acts on local residents' views (responsiveness)¹³.

Table 3 outlines the results for these measures:

- Overall the sector appears to have maintained levels of communication with residents. Consistently since September 2012, around two thirds of respondents have said that their council keeps residents very or fairly well informed about the services and benefits it provides. The most recent figure, for January 2014, is in line with this at 66 per cent.
- Respondent's satisfaction with the way their local council runs things has also remained stable since September 2012, with satisfaction relatively high at 70 per cent very or fairly satisfied.
- Finally, the polling asked respondents the extent to which they think their local council acts on the concerns of local residents. This is a measure of whether councils are perceived to listen and respond to local issues and problems. As with the previous measures, satisfaction levels have been maintained – there has been very little change in the proportion of respondents who thought that their council acts on the concerns of local residents. In the most recent round of polling, 61 per cent of respondents stated that their council does this a fair amount or a great deal.

¹³ Ipsos MORI, February 2012, Are You Being Served? Technical review of perception measures http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=f669da6b-083d-46cb-8311-f89187ea5a94&groupId=10171

	Sept 12	Jan 13	Apr 13	July 13	Oct 13	Jan 14
	%	%	%	%	%	%
% who feel their local council keeps residents very or fairly well informed about the services and benefits it provides ¹⁴	66	69	65	66	66	66
% who are very or fairly satisfied with the way their local council runs things ¹⁵	72	72	70	72	69	70
% who think that their local council acts on the concerns of local residents a great deal or fair amount ¹⁶	62	60	61	63	62	61

Base (all respondents): 1,006 British adults in September, 1,004 in January, 1,036 in April, 1,002 in July, 1,003 in October, 1,008 in January 2014

Survey on the views of senior members and officers

A telephone survey of a representative sample of chief executives, leaders and chairs of scrutiny was conducted by BMG Research over the course of October and November 2013. The total number of respondents from each of these groups is shown below:

- chief executives (87 respondents)
- leaders (81 respondents)
- chairs of scrutiny (101 respondents).¹⁷

A baseline survey was previously conducted over the course of October and November 2012 and this section highlights the results of the follow-up survey, and any changes between the two surveys. For the full results, please see Companion Report H.

Skills and capacity for sector-led improvement

Looking at capacity to undertake sector-led improvement, as Table 4 shows, 96 per cent of leaders were either moderately or greatly confident that their authority has the skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Chief executives were also very confident (94 per cent) and, similar to previous questions, chairs of scrutiny were also confident, but to a lower extent that was statistically significant (85 per cent answered 'to a moderate extent' or 'to a great extent').

When asked to consider local government as a whole, for all three groups a high but slightly smaller proportion of respondents were moderately or greatly confident that the sector has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Eighty eight per cent of leaders were at least moderately confident, 82 per cent of chief executives and 76 per cent of chairs of scrutiny; the differences between these groups were not large enough to be statistically significant.

¹⁴ The full response scale was: very well informed, fairly well informed, not very well informed, not well informed at all, don't know

¹⁵ The full response scale was: very satisfied, fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, don't know

¹⁶ The full response scale was: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, not at all, don't know

¹⁷ Chairs of scrutiny were included in this survey due to the important role that scrutiny plays in accountability. As may be expected, their results tend to be lower than that observed for leaders and chief executives, who will generally have more in depth contact with and knowledge of the concept of sector-led improvement and the breadth of support offered by the LGA.

Table 4: 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?		
	Chief Executives	Leaders	Chairs of scrutiny	Chief Executives	Leaders	Chairs of scrutiny
To a great or moderate extent	94	96	85	82	88	76
To a great extent	51	58	54	28	30	30
To a moderate extent	44	38	31	54	58	47
To a small extent	5	2	14	13	5	14
Not at all	1	1	1	5	2	2
Don't know	0	0	0	1	5	8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Base: all respondents (87 chief executives, 81 leaders, 101 chairs of scrutiny)

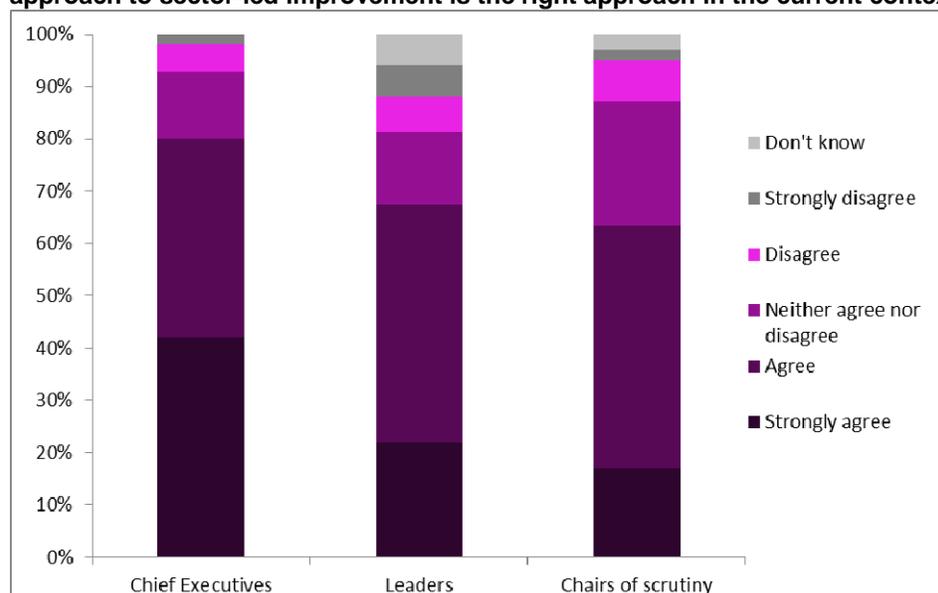
The sector-led improvement approach

Chief executives had a high level of awareness of the sector-led improvement approach (87 per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount), awareness amongst leaders was lower but still fairly high (60 per cent – with a further 27 per cent having heard a little), and for chairs of scrutiny was lower (34 per cent – with a further 32 per cent having heard a little). Levels of awareness for these groups have remained fairly stable since the baseline survey in 2012, although there was an increase in awareness amongst leaders.

As Figure 4 shows, those who were aware of the sector-led improvement approach were supportive. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “The approach to sector-led improvement is the right approach in the current context”, 80 per cent of those chief executives who were aware agreed or strongly agreed. The proportion of leaders and chairs of scrutiny agreeing were 68 per cent and 64 per cent respectively.

For chief executives and chairs of scrutiny, the majority of remaining respondents were neutral (13 per cent and 24 per cent respectively). Leaders were more evenly balanced, with 14 per cent neutral and 13 per cent disagreeing.

Figure 4: 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."



Base: all respondents that had heard a little, a moderate amount or a lot about sector-led improvement, or answered 'don't know' (85 chief executives, 72 leaders, 66 chairs of scrutiny)

Awareness of resources to support sector-led improvement

In order to gauge levels of awareness of the resources that the LGA has offered to support sector-led improvement, respondents were asked how much, if anything, they had heard about each. There was some significant variation between groups, with chief executives generally having higher levels of awareness.

- The highest levels of awareness amongst chief executives was of the provision of a corporate peer challenge at no cost (all respondents had heard at least a little about this), followed by member training and development (97 per cent).
- These were also the two offers that leaders were most commonly aware of – 93 per cent were aware of member training and development whilst 89 per cent were aware of the corporate peer challenge.
- Finally, the two offers of which chairs of scrutiny were most aware were member training and development (83 per cent) and the commitment to work with local authorities to develop local accountability tools (58 per cent).

Awareness of individual aspects of the offer of support had significantly improved in several cases since the baseline, particularly amongst leaders. For example:

- There was a significant increase in the proportion of chief executives that had heard a lot about provision of a corporate **peer challenge** at no cost, from 75 per cent to 90 per cent.
- There was a significant increase in the proportion of leaders that had heard at least a little about this, from 70 per cent to 89 per cent.
- There was a significant increase in the proportion of leaders that had heard at least a little about the **Knowledge Hub**, from 59 per cent to 80 per cent.
- There was a significant increase in the proportion of leaders that had heard at least a little about the **LG Inform** data service, from 51 per cent to 72 per cent.

Impact of resources to support sector-led improvement

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

Ninety three per cent of leaders who were aware of the offer, 93 per cent of chief executives and 76 per cent of chairs of scrutiny said that the support and resources offered had had a positive impact on their authority. More specifically:

- Sixty nine per cent of leaders, 59 per cent of chief executives and 53 per cent of chairs of scrutiny said that the positive impact on their authority had been great or moderate.
- An additional 24 per cent of leaders, 34 per cent of chief executives and 22 per cent of chairs of scrutiny said that there had been a small positive impact on their authority to date.

Ninety five per cent of chief executives who were aware of the offer, 86 per cent of leaders and 73 per cent of chairs of scrutiny thought that the support and resources offered had had a positive impact on the sector more generally. More specifically:

- Seventy nine per cent of chief executives, 76 per cent of leaders and 53 per cent of chairs of scrutiny said that the positive impact on the sector had been great or moderate.
- Further, 16 per cent of chief executives, 10 per cent of leaders and 20 per cent of chairs of scrutiny thought that there had been a small positive impact on the sector to date.

Driving improvement

As with the baseline survey, respondents were positive about improvement work in their own authorities. Ninety nine per cent of chief executives and 98 per cent of leaders either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "my authority is making advances in driving improvement". Chairs of scrutiny levels of agreement were also high, although statistically significantly lower, with 81 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Local accountability

Respondents remained positive about their work on local accountability, with 97 per cent of chief executives and 96 per cent of leaders either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "local accountability is strong in my authority". Chairs of scrutiny were still positive, but statistically significantly less so, with 76 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Survey of heads of policy and performance

This online survey of heads of policy and performance was sent via email to heads of policy or performance in 388 councils and fire and rescue authorities across England¹⁸, 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.¹⁹

¹⁸ Note that there are 398 councils and fire and rescue services in England, however twenty of them share performance services.

¹⁹ 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 baseline survey was conducted over the course of May and June 2012 and this section highlights the results of the follow-up survey in October 2013, and any changes between the two surveys. The full results and methodology can be found at Companion Report I.

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.

The sector-led improvement offer from the LGA

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.

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).

Looking specifically at the resources the LGA has offered 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 the later 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. Eighty seven per cent of those who were aware of the offer thought that the support and resources had had a positive impact on their authority. Seventy one per cent said this for the sector. More specifically:

- Well over half of respondents thought that the support and resources had had a great or moderate positive impact on both their own authority and the sector as a whole (58 per cent for their authority and 57 per cent for the sector).
- Twenty nine per cent identified a small positive impact on their authority, whilst 14 per cent said this for the sector.

Driving improvement

Heads of policy and performance reported a number of steps their authorities were taking to understand performance and drive improvement.²⁰ 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.

Local accountability

Respondents reported that their authorities were undertaking a number of activities to strengthen local accountability and to engage with residents to set local priorities. 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 online²¹: 61 per cent of respondent's 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:

²⁰ 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.

²¹ This was expenditure data in addition to that required to be published by the Code of Recommended Practice for Local Authorities on Data Transparency (which recommends publishing spend over £500 and senior salaries, for example).

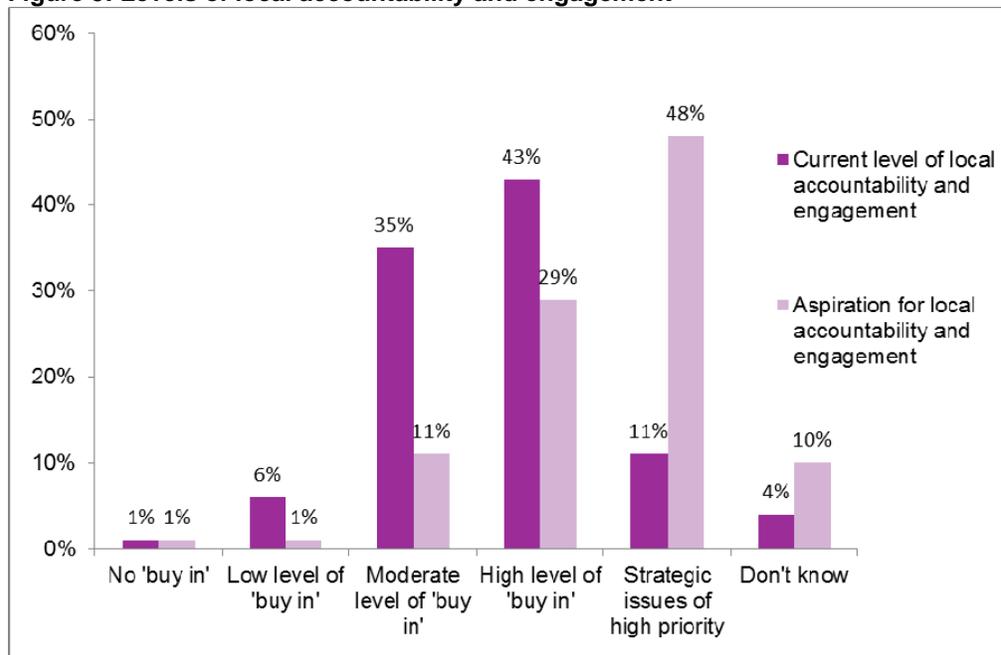
- influenced strategic thinking, and in particular helped with identifying priorities, budget recommendations and creating plans
- influenced service delivery or specific projects
- led to an improved relationship with their local residents, with an improved reputation, increased satisfaction and greater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

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. Figure 5 shows the results.

Overall, over half (54 per cent) thought their authority was already achieving 'high' or higher levels of accountability and engagement. 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 said that their authorities aspired to improve their level of accountability and engagement. More than three-quarters (77 per cent) sought to achieve or maintain 'high' or higher levels.

Figure 5: Levels of local accountability and engagement



Base: all respondents (117 respondents)

Economic climate

Respondents said that 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 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.

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 of this were highlighted, including understanding how this impacts on their role as councillor, and how to support communities to build capacity and self-reliance.

Perceptions audit

A 'perceptions audit' comprising in-depth interviews with 15 key stakeholders from organisations including government departments, regulators and inspectorates was undertaken by Ipsos MORI during October and November 2013. This updates a baseline set of interviews with stakeholders, which was conducted over the course of June and July 2012.

The purpose of the interviews was to gather feedback on perceptions of the sector-led improvement approach and stakeholders' level of confidence in whether the sector is able to lead its own improvement. The key findings coming out of these interviews are summarised below. The full report can be found at Companion Report J.

Awareness of, and confidence in, the theory behind and the principles underpinning sector-led improvement have seen improvement from the baseline. However, there is still a gap between how aware and confident stakeholders feel about the approach in theory and how much they know about and feel improvement is evidenced in practice.

Stakeholders were positive about the support the LGA offers local authorities with regard to sector-led improvement, although the findings suggest that more could still be done to increase stakeholders' awareness of the various elements of the LGA offer beyond peer challenge.

Stakeholders identified a number of risks with sector-led improvement, but positively they were also able to focus on ways to improve the approach going forwards, including better sharing with of best practice.

Stakeholders pointed out that they needed reassurance on how poorer performers are identified and what will trigger intervention. Engaging poor performers was still perceived by them as a key risk to sector-led improvement, despite evidence that the majority of local authorities have engaged.

One way to mitigate this concern may be better communication on the structures and processes already in place to identify and support poor performers. Lack of knowledge of the arrangements led many to believe mistakenly that these did not exist.

As sector-led improvement has started to bed-in, and views are largely positive, stakeholders would now like to see more evidence of improvement and how sector-led improvement has led to changes felt by service users.

Self, sector or centre? Approaches to turnaround

UK Research and Consulting Services Ltd (RCS) were commissioned to do a specific piece of independent evaluation looking at sector-led improvement compared to central government-led intervention, for turning around a council that is visibly failing. The researchers looked in detail at two case studies and concluded that sector-led improvement is better than central government intervention: local authorities should be responsible for their own improvement and turnaround, but where the council requires external support the sector should lead the improvement. Only where that proves insufficient should central government intervene; however it is worth noting that the possibility of central government intervention should the council fail to improve is seen as important, as it can act as a motivator for councils to engage with sector-led improvement.

This piece of work also demonstrated that sector-led improvement can help councils to turn themselves around, that it can be swifter to provide effective support, and that the sector does not shy away from delivering tough messages. The full results are outlined in 'Self, sector or centre? Approaches to turnaround'²².

Evaluating the offer of support to the sector

Corporate peer challenge

Corporate peer challenge is a core element of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer to local authorities. Managed and delivered by the sector on behalf of the sector, the process is designed to support councils to take responsibility for their own performance and improvement. It is a voluntary process commissioned by a council, and involves a small team of local government peers, led by a serving chief executive and supported by an LGA peer challenge manager, spending time in another council to provide a practitioner perspective and critical friend challenge.

All corporate peer challenges include a core component that looks at issues of leadership, corporate capacity and financial resilience, whose absence we know from experience is linked to organisational failure.

In the 2013 online survey of heads of policy and performance, a significantly higher proportion of respondents said that their authority was currently (or in the last 12 months) inviting challenge from peers in other authorities and partner organisations to understand performance and drive improvement, when compared to the baseline survey (59 per cent compared to 42 per cent in the baseline). In addition, 16 per cent said that they planned to do this in the next 12 months.

Most respondents (87 per cent) were aware that they could access a peer challenge from the LGA at no cost. In addition, the offer of a peer challenge at no cost also had high awareness amongst those chief executives and leaders surveyed in 2013 – 100 per cent and 89 per cent respectively were aware. Awareness amongst those chairs of scrutiny who were surveyed was lower at 54 per cent.

This high level of awareness is reflected by a high take up of the offer - by the end of 2014, more than 350 peer challenges will have been delivered to councils, including nearly 200 corporate peer challenges.

²² UK Research and Consultancy Services Ltd, 2014: Self, sector or centre? Approaches to turnaround' <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>

The LGA commissioned the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research at Cardiff Business School to undertake a comprehensive independent evaluation of the effectiveness and impacts of corporate peer challenge based on evidence from:

- an analysis of the first forty corporate peer challenge reports
- feedback from councils following their corporate peer challenge
- discussions with LGA managers
- a survey of senior officers in councils which had received a peer challenge
- interviews with leaders and senior officers from a sample of councils.

The full methodology and the complete set of findings are outlined in 'Supporting councils to succeed: independent evaluation of the LGA's corporate peer challenge programme'²³ and the key findings are outlined in the remainder of this section.

The researchers concluded that one of the great strengths of the offer is the way it is tailored to each council's needs. This means that it can be used in different ways by different authorities. All councils who were involved in the evaluation agreed that the preparation for a challenge was key to its success. It was also felt to be important to get the scope and timing right and to ensure ownership across the council.

The researchers also concluded that the process stands or falls by the quality of corporate peer challenge teams. Councils were impressed with the knowledge and experience shown by teams and the professional manner in which they conducted themselves. They particularly valued the fact that team members understood the complexity of working in a political environment. This helped to give councils confidence in the process.

Councils reported that the feedback and reports from corporate peer challenge teams offered challenging, constructive and honest insight.

Reports from the peer challenges were widely communicated. Nearly all councils had published their findings and more than three-quarters of survey respondents said that their council had developed an action plan in response to the report. Where an action plan wasn't produced, the key recommendations were integrated into existing improvement plans.

Councils reported that corporate peer challenge has had a positive impact on their capacity to take responsibility for their own improvement. It encouraged open and honest self-assessment and provided councillors, officers, staff, partners and communities with an independent review of a council's strengths and weaknesses and the challenges it faces.

As well as promoting greater self-awareness, corporate peer challenge increased councils' self-confidence, often enhancing their reputation and encouraging them to become more outward looking and to engage with regional and national initiatives.

The researchers concluded that the focus on the core components (setting priorities, financial resilience, effective leadership, governance and organisational capacity) is working well. More than two-thirds of survey respondents reported that corporate peer challenge had led to improvements in the way their council was run.

²³ Cardiff Business School, January 2014, Supporting councils to succeed: independent evaluation of the LGA's corporate peer challenge programme': <http://www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenge>

There was evidence that corporate peer challenge had helped improve the way councillors and officers work together. It encouraged councils to agree clear priorities and to integrate strategic management with resource planning.

It was also seen to support councils in improving their medium term financial planning, efficiency programmes, partnership working, performance management, and engagement with partners and local communities.

The researchers argued that it is unrealistic to expect a strong causal link between these impacts and directly improving outcomes for service users and citizens. However, they concluded that the process is undoubtedly encouraging councils to make changes that are likely to result in improvements in public confidence, corporate capacity, services and financial resilience.

Councils that had experienced the corporate peer challenge process were strong advocates for it. Many had encouraged other authorities to participate.

By March 2014, councils had contributed more than 2,500 days of senior councillor and officer time to corporate peer challenge teams. This represents a considerable investment by the sector in its own improvement, which is equivalent to millions of pounds worth of consultancy.

The researchers concluded it is important that councils that are at most risk of failure benefit from the expertise offered by corporate peer challenge, and that follow-up support is targeted on those councils in the greatest need of it.

Finally, the evaluation team highlighted that a key question for the future will be how to build on the success that peer challenge has already achieved to enable the sector to meet the growing demand for the offer, without compromising on quality.

There were a number of actions which the Cardiff evaluation team recommended the LGA should take to further fine-tune the corporate peer challenge process in order to ensure that the sector builds on the success it has already achieved. Many of these have already been implemented by the LGA, including the on-going recruitment of peers and sharing the learning arising from peer challenges.

LG Inform

LG Inform is a free online data service which provides:

- a single point of access to a wide range of key contextual, financial and performance data
- the ability to share and compare performance information between councils and to create a range of score cards and reports.

The prototype version of the tool was launched in July 2011. A new version, with improved performance and functionality, was made available in July 2013, with a formal launch in September 2013. On 28 November 2013, LG Inform was made available to members of the public, who are able to view a range of reports and data without registering.

Awareness of LG Inform is high amongst heads of policy and performance – in the 2013 survey, 83 per cent had heard of the tool. Awareness of the tool was also high amongst those chief executives and leaders surveyed in 2013 – 83 per cent and 72 per cent respectively were aware. This is a significant increase in awareness amongst leaders from 51 per cent in 2012. As with

the other offers, awareness amongst those chairs of scrutiny surveyed was lower – 47 per cent were aware.

The LG Inform team monitors the performance of the tool through a balanced scorecard, which contains a range of usage statistics updated on a monthly basis. Outlined below are the key messages as at February/March 2014.

Usage statistics

At February 2014, the new version of LG Inform (introduced July 2013) had 1,755 registered users. This is an increase of 14 per cent from the 1,534 users of the prototype recorded in the first baseline evaluation report (June 2012). Note that only local authority users can register, members of the public do not need to register to view reports and statistics.

Table 5 shows the number of local authorities and other organisations that had at least one member of staff or councillor registered on LG Inform at 3 March 2014. Coverage is high - all county councils, all metropolitan districts and all London boroughs have at least one registered user, and all but one English unitary. Take up amongst shire districts remains lower than for other types of authority; although a substantial proportion (83 per cent) are registered.²⁴

England councils	Registered		Not registered		Total	% registered	
	July 12	March 14	July 12	March 14		July 12	March 14
County	27	27	0	0	27	100%	100%
Shire District	162	165	39	35	200	81%	83%
English Unitary	53	55	3	1	56	95%	98%
London Borough	32	33	1	0	33	97%	100%
Metropolitan District	36	36	0	0	36	100%	100%
England council subtotal	310	316	43	36	352	88%	90%
Other organisations							
Fire and rescue	29	31	21	20	51	58%	61%

Figure 6 shows how the total proportion of registered authorities that had at least one user log in within the 30 day period and the 60 day period prior to the start of each month has changed since July 2012 (when this information started to be recorded).

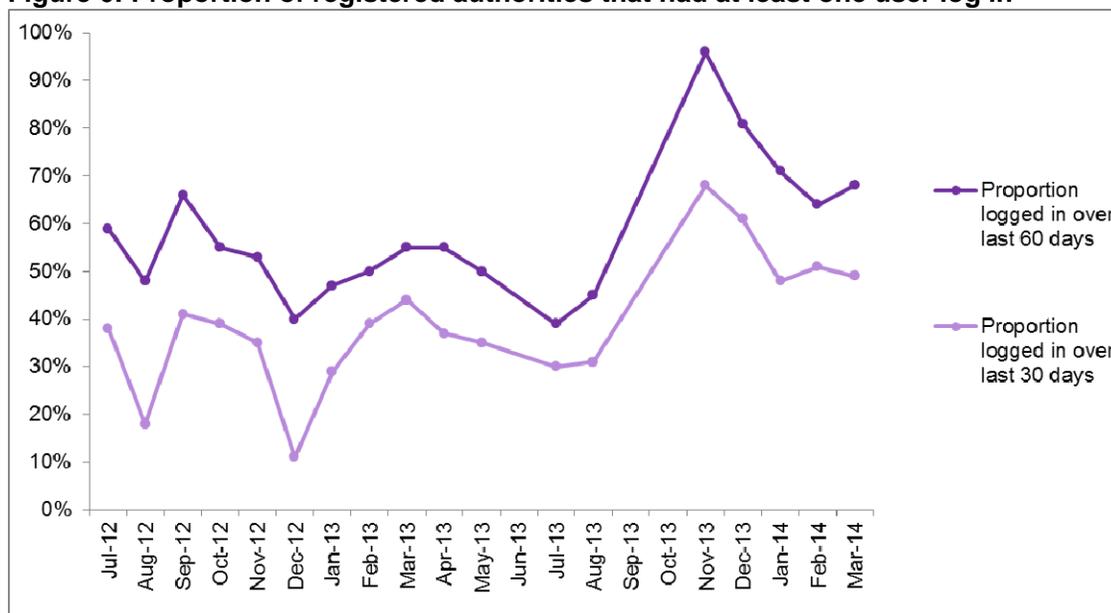
It shows that this figure is fairly variable, although since the new version of the tool started to be widely publicised in September, the proportions logging in have increased and to date, have remained higher than previously. The high level of use in November is likely due to the tool being made available to the public, which would have also increased interest amongst users from local authorities.

Overall, since the new version of LG Inform was launched at the end of July 2013 until the end of March 2014, it has had 22,504 visits from 9,006 unique visitors. On average, users accessing the site during March 2014 spent 13 minutes 20 seconds using it.

²⁴ This lower figure for districts may in part be because several districts are merging or sharing teams; therefore in some cases two districts can be represented by one user, using an email address from just one of the councils.

²⁵ Note that although there are officially 201 districts in England, Adur and Worthing are combined and therefore treated by LG Inform as one authority.

Figure 6: Proportion of registered authorities that had at least one user log in



As Figure 6 shows, the proportion of registered authorities with staff using the tool has increased since the new version was launched. Table 6 shows that this figure varies significantly by authority type. Generally, counties tend to have higher levels of users logging in to the tool than average, whilst the proportion logging on from registered districts are consistently lower than average.

Table 6: Proportion of registered authorities that had at least one user log in, by authority type - as at 3 March 2014

	County	Shire District	English Unitary	London Borough	Metropolitan District	Total
Proportion logged in over last 30 days	70%	39%	73%	55%	39%	49%
Proportion logged in over last 60 days	89%	57%	89%	61%	78%	68%

'Metrics' are the specific indicators or data items available through LG Inform – for example 'spend on adult social care per head of population'. The number of populated published metrics available to users has increased substantially since June 2012, by 163 per cent (from 734 to 1,928 in February 2014).

New metrics are added and released once data has been checked, on an ongoing basis. During February, 24 per cent of all metrics in the system were newly published or updated with more up to date data.²⁶

Public use

Since LG Inform was made open to the public, councils are starting to use it as a means of providing information to their local communities. Some examples of this are outlined below:

²⁶ These are calculated as a proportion of all populated metrics in the system. This is different from published metrics as some metrics are populated with data but not yet published.

- Coventry City Council are using LG Inform on their website, for example: http://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/200009/performance/1732/infographics_and_visualisations/4
- The London Borough of Barnet is using LG Inform headline reports on their website: http://www.barnet.gov.uk/info/940445/lg_inform_benchmarking/1162/lg_inform_benchmarking
- Wealden District Council has used LG Inform data for the analysis presented on their website: http://www.wealden.gov.uk/wealden/your_council/performance/planning_and_bcontrol_service_performanc/policy_planning_performance.aspx
- Several councils such as Rochdale, Dorset and North Tyneside are signposting their residents to LG Inform to find out more about their performance, for example: <https://www.dorsetforyou.com/368691>

An analysis of LG Inform user feedback and Knowledge Hub group activity can be found in Companion Report K.

Leadership Academy

Effective political leadership is key to sustained improvement. In order to provide development support for political leaders the LGA has made available one subsidised place on the Leadership Academy for every council over the three year period from 2011/12. The academy consists of three modules covering issues such as personal, political, organisational and community leadership.

Take up of the Leadership Academy

Since the start of 2011/12, a total of 327 councillors have attended the main Leadership Academy programme. This breaks down by year as follows:

- 95 in 2011/12
- 107 in 2012/13
- 125 in 2013/14

Awareness of the member training and development that is offered by the LGA was fairly high amongst heads of policy and performance – 68 per cent had heard of this. Awareness was higher in the survey of senior members and officers. Ninety seven per cent of chief executives, 93 per cent of leaders and 83 per cent of chairs of scrutiny had heard at least a little about this.

In an online survey of member services officers conducted in November and December 2013, respondents were asked specifically about their awareness of one subsidised place on the Leadership Academy.²⁷ Of the 88 member services officers that answered the question, 65 per cent were aware, suggesting that it may be beneficial to raise awareness amongst this group.

²⁷ The survey was sent to all 373 local authorities in membership of the LGA, plus nine other authorities that had sent councillors on the academy and at the close a total of 94 (25 per cent) had responded. For a full explanation of the methodology and full set of responses to this survey please see Companion Report L.

Views of the 2011/12 and 2012/13 Leadership Academy

In November 2013, a survey was sent to all 196 sitting councillors who participated in the Leadership Academy in 2011/12 or 2012/13. Responses were received from 75 councillors – a response rate of 38 per cent. The key findings are outlined below. For a full explanation of the methodology and the full set of results, please see Companion Report L.

Respondents were very positive about the programme:

- Ninety three per cent said that, overall, they were greatly or moderately satisfied with the Leadership Academy.²⁸
- When asked the extent to which the programme had covered issues relevant to them, 89 per cent said this had been achieved to a great or moderate extent.
- Ninety one per cent of respondents were satisfied with the learning tools provided to a great or moderate extent.
- Ninety one per cent agreed to a great or moderate extent that the programme had the right level of participation.
- Eighty seven per cent said that their participation has helped them to tackle specific leadership challenges that they have since faced, either to a great or moderate extent.
- Eighty seven per cent agreed to a great or moderate extent that the programme provided a basis for improvement in their role as a councillor.
- Forty-five respondents provided brief written details of how the programme had helped them to improve in their role. These mostly referred to greater confidence, improved relationships with other members or senior officers, better understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, and better community leadership or engagement.
- Respondents were shown a series of five statements outlining how they would speak about the programme to others. As Table 7 shows, the vast majority (95 per cent) said that they would speak positively about the Leadership Academy.²⁹

	Per cent
I speak positively about the Leadership Academy without being asked	61
I speak positively about the Leadership Academy if I am asked about it	33
I have no views about the Leadership Academy	1
I speak negatively about the Leadership Academy if I am asked about it	1
I speak negatively about the Leadership Academy without being asked	0
Don't know	3
Total	100

Base: 75 (all respondents)

Further, in the survey of member services officers, respondents who had sent a councillor on the programme in 2011/12 or 2012/13 were asked the extent to which they thought that attending had benefitted these councillors in their work. For 2011/12, all but one of the 22 relevant

²⁸ The full answer scale was: 'to a great extent', 'to a moderate extent', 'to a small extent', 'not at all', 'don't know'.

²⁹ Please note that although it appears that the two answer options sum to 94 per cent, this is due to the fact the figures in the table have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Please note that this may also occur in other parts of the report where answer categories are combined.

respondents answered 'to a great extent' or 'to a moderate extent'; with the one remaining respondent answering 'don't know'. For 2012/13, all but three of the 20 relevant respondents said that their councillors had benefitted to a great or moderate extent, with two answering 'to a small extent' and the other answering 'don't know'.

Views of those authorities that have not made use of the Leadership Academy

Forty four per cent (41 respondents) of those who responded to the survey of member services officers had councillors that had attended prior to 2011/12 but not since, whilst 20 per cent (19 respondents) had never had anyone attend. For both of these groups, the most common reason given for this was budget constraints: 21 of the 41 respondents whose councillors had attended prior to 2011/12 but not since gave this reason, as did 10 of the 19 respondents whose council had never sent anyone on the programme.

LC Leadership Programme

The LC Leadership Programme (formerly known as the Leeds Castle programme) was designed for chief executives and leaders in local government, customising their learning so it could be applied to real-life issues. In November and December 2013 an evaluation of this programme was undertaken. The key findings are outlined below, and the full evaluation report can be found at Companion Report M.

2013 was the last year that the programme ran in the form described below. The evaluation looked at the impact the programme had, as well as providing feedback and learning to inform the development of future LGA leadership support.

The programme was bespoke for each cohort, looking at leadership challenges relevant to the times in which participants were leading, but there were a number of common core elements, in particular: a foundation of knowledge around systems thinking; problem classification; leadership styles and approaches; personal presence; and the impact of history.

The programme also included periodic one to one coaching support for each participant.

This evaluation looked at the experiences of the most recent two cohorts (cohort eight and cohort nine) through analysis of feedback forms and a small number of in depth telephone interviews. Thirty one leaders and chief executives in total participated in the programme over these two cohorts:

- Cohort eight: Autumn 2011 – Spring 2012
- Cohort nine: Autumn 2012 – Spring 2013

Although participants gave a range of constructive suggestions for programme improvements, overall feedback from both cohorts was largely positive. Participants generally thought highly of the LC Leadership Programme, found it effective and highlighted that their expectations were broadly met.

Views of the programme

Participants were asked to identify which aspects of the programme they found particularly useful. A wide range of aspects were reported, but participants in both cohorts commonly said that interacting with others in their cohort and having the opportunity to bond, build networks and gel with other participants was highly beneficial.

Participants also noted that having a change of environment gave them the space and time to reflect, listen, think and absorb views, ideas and experiences. Several specific sessions were also highlighted, including the RADA sessions which looked at participants' personal impact by giving a deeper understanding of the importance and qualities of clear and focused communication skills.

In order to enable the LGA to continue to develop and refine its leadership support offer, participants were also asked to identify areas of the programme that were less useful than others, and suggest areas where the programme could have been improved.

Common themes were around the inclusion of more group work and practical discussions, and less 'academic' content, as well as making the most of the expertise that existed within the group participants themselves.

Participants' expectations

Where participants had defined expectations for the programme, these were wide ranging but included:

- An introduction to tools in order to improve and renew leadership styles and the development of frameworks for thinking through issues.
- Space for personal growth and reflection outside the "day to day" environment.
- Reflecting on the future of local government in challenging times and raising their awareness of the issues facing local government and public services more broadly.

Broadly these expectations were met and in some cases exceeded. Where expectations were not fully met, participants made a range of suggestions as to how this could be addressed in future.

Longer term impacts of the programme

The telephone interviews also looked at the longer term impacts of the programme. Interviewees were presented with some aspects of leadership that the programme aimed to cover, and were asked whether the programme changed their perspective on or helped them to further develop in any of these areas.

Areas where participants commonly identified an impact were work undertaken on understanding the link between leadership, council success and positive outcomes for the local area, and also communication skills, as well as resilience in times of adversity and empathy when dealing with others.

Developing networks

An aim of the programme was to introduce participants to one another, building networks for informal support and advice. Interviewees were asked whether they thought that this had been achieved for their cohort and, if so, whether this had been of benefit.

Interviewees generally had felt support from their cohort on the course, and gave examples where these ongoing relationships had proved valuable. However, issues around geographic location and time constraints were highlighted as reasons why, in some instances, networks had not continued to develop since the course.

Wider impacts

Interviewees were asked whether they had any examples of things that they had done differently as a result of the programme, that had led to better outcomes or improvement in their authority or for their area or local community, or had any impact on the reputation and influence of their authority on partners or the general public.

A number of interviewees said that, whilst they couldn't draw direct causal links between the course and wider outcomes, the skills that they learnt have contributed to positive changes which would have wider impacts. However, some more specific examples were given, particularly around improved partnership working using the skills learned on the course.

Centre for Public Scrutiny

The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) is a charity, whose principal focus is on scrutiny, accountability and good governance in the public sector. The LGA funds CfPS to provide support to councils who want to improve in this area. As at March 2014, key CfPS activity during 2013/14 included:

- produced four policy briefings (with another one due for publication in April 2014, and a series of 14 Practice Guides being prepared for publication, also in April)
- carried out two pieces of research in partnership with/funded by the LGA – “Police and Crime Panels: one year on”³⁰ and “Rethinking governance”³¹
- carried out detailed research on local growth, feeding into the LGA’s agenda on place-based finance and sub-regional economic development
- produced a comprehensive annual survey of overview and scrutiny in local government, producing a definitive picture of overview and scrutiny around the country which builds on surveys carried out in previous years
- delivered an annual conference attended by 110 scrutiny practitioners (councillors and officers)
- continued its research and support on health scrutiny, including work with the Care Quality Commission and other partners and leading the debate on scrutiny’s response to the challenges of the Francis Report
- actively contributed to a number of local authority areas in which the LGA is working as part of its sector-led improvement agenda
- delivered help, assistance and guidance directly to a number of local councils by means of paid-for consultancy
- answered 46 helpdesk queries.

Survey of senior members and officers

The survey of senior members and officers asked respondents whether they had heard of CfPS before receiving the survey. Seventy nine per cent of chief executives, 76 per cent of chairs of scrutiny and 67 per cent of leaders said that they had.

³⁰ Centre for Public Scrutiny, Police and Crime Panels: one year on, 2014:
<http://www.cfps.org.uk/publications?item=11563&offset=0>

³¹ Centre for Public Scrutiny and LGA, Rethinking Governance, 2014:
<http://www.cfps.org.uk/publications?item=11561&offset=0>

Those respondents who had heard of CfPS were then asked if their council had used any of the services provided by CfPS in the year previous to the survey. Fifty one per cent of those chairs of scrutiny that had heard of CfPS were aware of their authority making use of a CfPS service, followed by 38 per cent of chief executives and 24 per cent of leaders.

Finally, those respondents who were aware that their authority had made use of a CfPS service were asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with these services. Due to the small sample size for this sub group, the answers of chief executives, leaders and chairs of scrutiny have been combined; of this combined group, 77 per cent said that they were very or fairly satisfied.

Survey of overview and scrutiny in local government 2012/13

In addition, CfPS run an annual survey of scrutiny officers; this was conducted online in April 2013, and achieved 388 responses, from 205 different councils across England and Wales. The survey contained a small number of questions on respondents' use of and views about CfPS, and the answers to these questions are summarised below. For the full set of findings please see the full survey report.³²

Respondents were asked what effect the work of CfPS had had on the work that they had carried out in the year prior to the survey. Of 278 people answering the question, 18 per cent stated that this had had a significant or substantial impact, with a further 63 per cent citing some impact.³³ Respondents were then asked to explain how CfPS work had helped them, and if there was anything that CfPS could do differently. There were several themes coming out of these text responses:

- CfPS's work around health scrutiny, their guidance on Police and Crime Panels, Policy Briefings and their "Pulling it together" guide to legislation were all cited as particular strengths which had had significant impact at local level.
- Respondents appreciated the support that CfPS was able to provide in person and over the phone, and the support offered by CfPS's Expert Advisers. People were particularly keen to see CfPS being more active in regional networking, and using regional networks to deliver training.
- There was a concern that some CfPS publications can be too prone to use jargon and are not always as focused as they might be on the experiences and needs of practitioners on the ground – particularly given practitioners' straitened financial circumstances. People were keen to see shorter, snappier pieces of research which focused on "scrutiny fundamentals". In response to this concern CfPS committed to producing a series of Practice Guides which will be published in April 2014.
- Some respondents felt that CfPS could do more to support districts.

Looking more specifically at particular CfPS services, only a small proportion of respondents (fewer than 5 per cent) had not used any of these services in the year previous to the survey (suggesting, when compared to the survey of senior members and officers, that usage of CfPS services by scrutiny officers is higher than these more senior groups are aware of). Levels of usage of individual services were very varied, in part reflecting councils' different responsibilities, (for example, the health e-newsletter and health events are targeted at councils with formal

³² Centre for Public Scrutiny, Survey of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government 2012/13, http://www.cfps.org.uk/publications?item=7334&filter=cfps%20annual%20report%20and%20survey&filterfrom=issue_name&match_all=true&offset=0

³³ The answer options were: significant effect, substantial effect, some effect, no effect.

health scrutiny powers, and so exclude districts). The services that respondents had most commonly used were:

- free (non health-related) publications (76 per cent had used these)
- forum/online services (72 per cent)
- review library (68 per cent).

Looking at views of these services:

- sixty eight per cent of all respondents rated the free (non health-related) publications as good or excellent.
- fifty four per cent rated the forum/online services as good or excellent
- fifty four per cent rated the review library as good or excellent.

Knowledge Hub

The Knowledge Hub was launched by the LGA in April 2012. It is a web based service providing a single window to improvement in local government and is free to use for individuals from the public and voluntary sector. It provides tools to help people connect, share and learn from each other.

In November 2013, the LGA formed a new partnership with CapacityGrid to assure the long-term future of the Knowledge Hub. Under this partnership, existing Knowledge Hub staff were transferred to CapacityGrid and joined an enlarged team, which assumed overall operational and development management responsibility. The LGA became a foundation partner and continues to use the Knowledge Hub to engage with its members and as an improvement tool for the sector.

Using social networking models, Knowledge Hub enables individuals to create connections to peers and experts in their fields of interest, helping them share learning, experiences and ideas, and drive sector-led improvement. Some examples of key activity in recent months include:

- #OurDay 2013 – a 24 hour ‘tweetathon’ was organised via Knowledge Hub for the second year running to advocate the use of social media as an engagement tool for local leaders to engage with their peers and communities. This involved asking councils, officers and councillors to do live tweeting of what they were up to throughout the day. The day produced over 11,000 tweets from 3,500 tweeters, reaching around three million people.
- The Fostering Information Exchange (FIE), a group dedicated to celebrating and spreading good practice in foster care, has seen an explosion in membership and activity after an invitation was sent to thousands of foster carers and those working in children’s services by Children’s Minister Edward Timpson MP. Since its launch in November 2012, the FIE now has nearly 700 members and is consistently among the top 20 most active groups on the platform. An FIE survey in May 2013 revealed that 75 per cent of respondents found the group useful for sharing their own experiences and 86 per cent valued the group for what they could learn from others.
- The LocalGov Digital Network has used its Knowledge Hub groups to connect a wide range of digital practitioners across local government. Not only has the group shared ideas and experiences, but it has developed several practical products to support those working in digital services in councils and councillors. These include:

- content standards and guidance
- web usability testing tool
- digital democracy discovery days.

Sharing information and best practice with others is a key method that councils are using to understand performance in their councils and drive improvement; in the 2013 online survey of heads of policy and performance, 89 per cent stated that they were doing this.

Most respondents were aware that they could be using Knowledge Hub to help with this (91 per cent were aware of Knowledge Hub), and this is significantly higher than awareness in the baseline survey (82 per cent). This level of awareness places the tool as the best known aspect of the LGA's offer on sector-led improvement amongst this group.

Knowledge Hub also had high levels of awareness in the survey of senior officers and members. Ninety four per cent of chief executive respondents were aware of Knowledge Hub, and 80 per cent of leaders (a significant increase from 59 per cent in the baseline survey). Awareness amongst chairs of scrutiny was lower – at 54 per cent – although it is worth noting that this was the case for all aspects of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer.

Knowledge Hub usage and performance statistics

Outlined below are the available usage and performance statistics for Knowledge Hub.

The Knowledge Hub had 166,131 registered users at 31 January 2014. This is an increase of 54 per cent from the 107,538 users that were transferred from Communities of Practice at the official launch of Knowledge Hub on 1 April 2012.

About a third of registered users have been active on the site (i.e. had logged in) between February 2013 and February 2014.

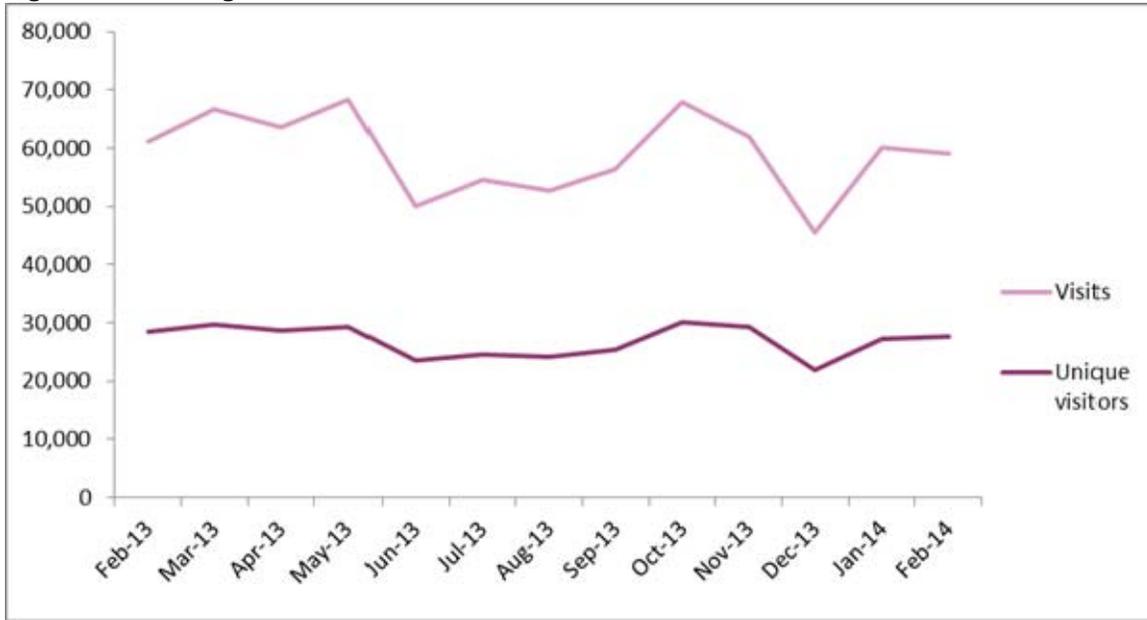
At 31 January 2014, there were 1,502 groups in Knowledge Hub. These groups enable members to discuss issues and ideas in forums, share documents and other files, connect with other members, share thoughts through writing blogs and post up relevant events. This number of groups is an increase of 43 per cent from the 1,054 groups that were transferred from Communities of Practice at the official launch of Knowledge Hub on 1 April 2012.

About 70 per cent of these groups have been active between February 2013 and February 2014.

Figure 7 shows the number of visits that Knowledge Hub received over the previous year (February 2013 – February 2014).

- In February 2014, the site received 59,034 visits from 27,680 unique visitors, meaning that each visitor visited on average two to three times during the month.
- This is a similar level of usage to that seen a year ago; in February 2013, the site had 61,111 visits from 28,560 visitors (again, an average of two to three visits per person).
- Although there have been some fluctuations (for example a dip over the Christmas period and a spike around the time when a consultation on the future of Knowledge Hub was being conducted in May 2013, and another in October 2013 – the month when #OurDay took place), usage statistics have remained broadly stable over the period.

Figure 7: Knowledge Hub visitor statistics



Source: Google analytics

Between February 2013 and February 2014, on average 28 per cent of those that used the site had never visited before, whilst the remainder (72 per cent) were returning visitors. These proportions have stayed relatively stable over the period – fluctuating between 27 per cent and 30 per cent being new visitors each month.

Table 8 shows the average visit duration for each month over the period February 2013 to February 2014. This has stayed fairly stable over the period, with the lowest average duration being five minutes and 51 seconds (December 2013), and the highest seven minutes 49 seconds (February 2013).

As the Knowledge Hub is an interactive website a reasonable length of time on the site is to be expected. Conversely, the team are aware of the need to balance this with ensuring that users are spending productive time on the site, and are not on it for a long time because, for example, they are taking a long time to find what they are searching for, which may for example be signalled by a large number of page views per visit. To date, this does not seem to be a problem - on average over the period users viewed seven pages per visit, with little fluctuation in this figure.

Table 8: Average Knowledge Hub visit duration													
	Feb 13	Mar 13	Apr 13	May 13	June 13	July 13	Aug 13	Sept 13	Oct 13	Nov 13	Dec 13	Jan 14	Feb 14
Average time on site (minutes and seconds)	7.49	7.18	7.27	7.35	7.12	7.06	7.14	6.45	6.26	6.11	5.51	6.19	5.59

Source: Google analytics

Knowledge Hub online survey

A survey on online learning and the Knowledge Hub was undertaken between December 2012 and February 2013. The survey examined the extent of engagement in learning and experience sharing activities within local authorities, as well as levels of satisfaction with the Knowledge Hub.

Individuals were sampled from both the Knowledge Hub and the LGA contacts database (CRM database), in order to achieve a sub-sample of those already engaged in online learning activities (those using the Knowledge Hub), and a sub-sample of those less likely to be so (those sampled from the CRM database and not registered on the Knowledge Hub).

This section provides a summary for local authority respondents only. The total number of local authority respondents was 827, consisting of 774 officers and 53 councillors. This was a 14 per cent response rate for local authority officers.³⁴

The key findings are outlined below and a fuller explanation of the findings and methodology can be found in Companion Report N.

Those respondents who were registered on and using the Knowledge Hub (609 respondents) were asked why they use the Knowledge Hub. The most common reason given was in order to find an answer to a specific question (62 per cent), whilst just over half (52 per cent) said that they use Knowledge Hub to share good practice. The third most common reason was to network and find other people who share their interests/work in a similar field (45 per cent).

Two thirds of respondents (66 per cent) rated the Knowledge Hub overall as very or fairly good. Sixteen per cent said that they would rate it as not very good or not good at all, whilst 18 per cent answered 'don't know'. Looking at specific elements of the tool:

- nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) rated the performance of the Knowledge Hub (in terms of speed/availability) very or fairly good
- two-thirds (65 per cent) rated the ease of use as very or fairly good
- sixty-two per cent rated the ability of Knowledge Hub to meet their needs as very or fairly good.
- fifty-eight per cent rated the ability to find what they needed on Knowledge Hub as very or fairly good.

Finally, respondents were shown a list of potential benefits that they may have gained from being a member of the Knowledge Hub and were asked to indicate which ones, if any, applied to them. The most commonly selected benefit selected by respondents was that the Knowledge Hub allows them to keep up to date with current thinking on an issue or concern (53 per cent selected this). Other commonly identified benefits were:

- exchanged ideas (42 per cent)
- gained help from others to solve a problem (37 per cent)
- shared good practice (36 per cent)
- quick access to a range of resources (27 per cent).

³⁴ Fourteen per cent is a standard response rate for a survey of this type. However at this level of response, the results presented should be taken as the views of this group of respondents, rather than being more widely representative. The sample covered Knowledge Hub users across the whole of the United Kingdom; however it should be noted that the sector-led improvement approach and support offer applies to England only.

The benefits that were identified by the fewest respondents were ‘reduced carbon footprint (less need to travel to meetings and events)’ (six per cent) and ‘saved money for my organisation (five per cent)’. In addition, 21 per cent of respondents said that they had not yet gained any benefits.

YouChoose

YouChoose is an online budget simulator that encourages members of the public to consider where council budget reductions should fall, where efficiencies might be made, and where income might be generated.³⁵ It is offered at no cost to councils in England and Wales through a partnership between the LGA and the London Borough of Redbridge.

The 2013 survey of heads of policy and performance suggests that there is some way to go before councils are using tools such as YouChoose to strengthen local accountability on a regular basis; whilst 25 per cent had used a budget simulation tool in the previous 12 months, 54 per cent had no current plans to do so. Whilst this is to be expected – budget simulation tools are just one of many tools that councils may choose to use to engage with residents – it does seem a key challenge that remains for YouChoose is to communicate to authorities the benefits and reasons to use the tool.

Some work may also be needed to promote the tool further – 56 per cent of respondents were aware of the LGA’s commitment to work with local authorities to develop local accountability tools, such as YouChoose and scrutiny support from the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

YouChoose usage statistics

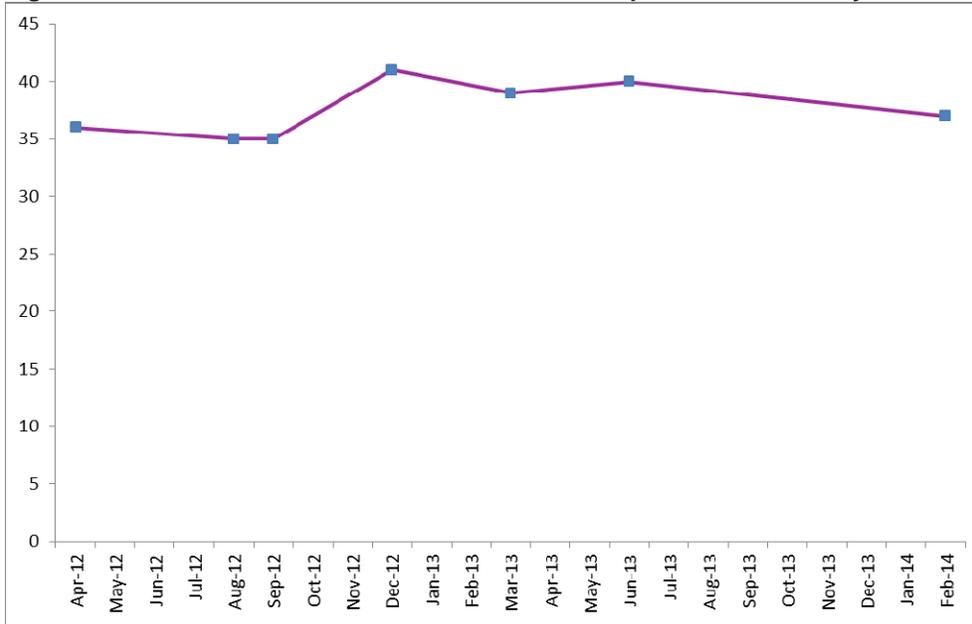
There have been 157 councils set up to use YouChoose in the period between when the partnership between the LGA and Redbridge was established in summer 2010 and January 2014.

Figure 8 shows the number of live consultations that have been run over the period April 2012 to February 2014. The level has stayed fairly stable, with 36 live consultations in April 2012, rising to 41 in December 2012 and 37 in February 2014.³⁶

³⁵ www.local.gov.uk/research-youchoose-tool

³⁶ Note that data may occasionally include councils running more than one consultation concurrently. There is also the possibility that consultations may be marked as “live” even if councils are not providing a link from their website or actively promoting them.

Figure 8: Number of live YouChoose consultations April 2012 – February 2014



YouChoose online survey

Between 17 July and 7 August 2012 the LGA conducted an online survey of users and non-users of YouChoose in order to understand how people had heard about the tool, what they thought about it and, where councils were not using it, the reasons for this. The key findings are outlined below and a full explanation of the findings and methodology can be found in Companion Report O.

An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to 165 officers in councils who had either expressed an interest in using YouChoose, or had requested to be set up to use the tool. There were 46 responses to the survey giving a response rate of 28 per cent. The key findings were:

- The research found that people who had used the tool were generally positive about it and found the tool easy to use, easy to administer and easy for residents to understand.
- On the other hand some respondents found that YouChoose took a lot of officer time to set up and some were not happy with the data output, as this was not in a format that they could easily analyse themselves.³⁷
- Respondents who had previously used YouChoose were more likely to say they planned to use the tool in the future than those who had not used it.
- Around half of respondents who had asked to be set up to use YouChoose had not in fact gone on to use it as part of a budget consultation. This leaves a pool of potential new users who know about the tool, but need further encouragement to use it.

³⁷ It is worth noting though that since the close of fieldwork for this research, improvements have been made to the way in which data can be downloaded, including making it available in an easy to analyse format.

Evaluating sector-led improvement in adult social care

Two online surveys were undertaken to look at sector-led improvement in adult social care, with a particular focus on the work of the 'Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care' (TEASC) programme: one of directors of adult social services and one of lead members for adult social services. A baseline survey was also conducted for each group a year previously.

The TEASC programme board is working with councils to support sector-led improvement for adult social care. Its core elements involve self-evaluation, regional work, robust performance data and peer support and challenge.

The results for these surveys are summarised below (with any changes since the baseline also highlighted) and a full explanation of the findings and methodology can be found in Companion Report P (directors' survey) and Companion Report Q (lead members' survey).

The directors' survey was sent via email to directors of adult social services in all 152 councils with responsibility for this service in England, and was in the field over the course of December 2013. Responses were received from 76 directors – a response rate of 50 per cent. This is a good response rate for a survey of this kind.

The survey of lead members for adult social services was in the field over the course of December 2013 and January 2014. Responses were received from 69 lead members – a response rate of 45 per cent.

Skills and capacity for sector-led improvement

As Table 9 shows, respondents tended to be confident in the skills and capacity of both their own authority and of the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Ninety six per cent of directors and 94 per cent of lead members were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent, compared to 88 per cent of directors and 70 per cent of lead members with confidence in the sector as a whole. Levels of confidence had not changed significantly since the baseline survey.

Table 9: To what extent would you say you are confident that:				
	a) <u>a) your own council's adult social care department</u> currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?		b) <u>the local government adult social care sector as a whole (i.e. across all councils)</u> currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?	
	Directors	Lead members	Directors	Lead members
	%	%	%	%
To a great or moderate extent	96	94	88	70
To a great extent	55	64	30	19
To a moderate extent	41	30	58	51
To a small extent	4	4	8	17
Not at all	0	1	0	0
Don't know	0	0	4	13
Total	100	100	100	100

Base: all respondents (76 directors, 69 lead members)

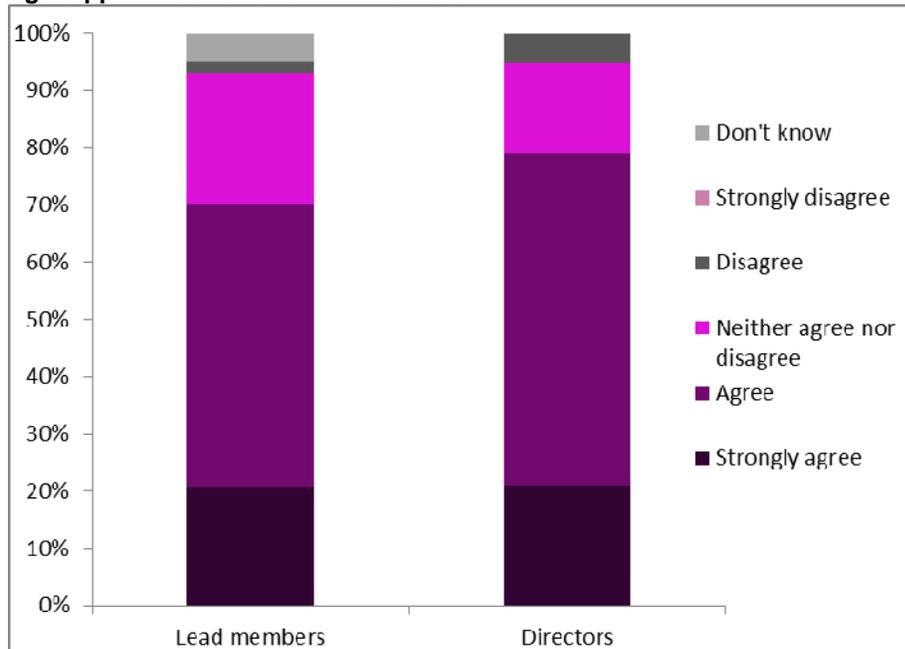
The TEASC programme

Awareness of the TEASC programme and the approach it has developed to sector-led improvement was very high amongst directors (99 per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount). Awareness amongst lead members had increased significantly since the baseline, with 82 per cent now saying that had heard at least a moderate amount and an additional 13 per cent having heard a little, compared to 53 per cent having heard at least a moderate amount and 26 per cent a little in the baseline.

Those respondents who had some awareness of TEASC were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “the Towards Excellence programme approach to sector-led improvement in adult social care is the right approach in the current context”.

As Figure 9 shows, for both lead members and directors, the majority who were aware of the approach agreed that it was the right one in the current context. Seventy nine per cent of directors agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 16 per cent were neutral. Seventy one per cent of those lead members who were aware agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 23 per cent were neutral.

Figure 9: Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: “the Towards Excellence programme approach to sector-led improvement in adult social care is the right approach in the current context”.



Base: all respondents that had heard at least a little about TEASC or answered 'don't know' (66 lead members, 76 directors)

Impact of TEASC

Respondents who had some awareness of TEASC and its approach to sector-led improvement in adult social care were asked the extent to which they thought that the support and resources offered by TEASC had, to date, had a positive impact on the capacity of adult social care, both within their own authority and across the local government sector as a whole, to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

- Respondents were positive about this – 93 per cent of directors for adult social care thought that the support and resources had had a positive impact on their authority, whilst 83 per cent thought this for the sector. More specifically:

- 70 per cent of directors thought that the support and resources had had a great or moderate positive impact on their authority, whilst two thirds thought this for the sector (66 per cent).
- A further 24 per cent thought that there had been a small positive impact on their authority, and 17 per cent for the sector.
- Eighty three per cent of lead members for adult social care thought that the support and resources had had a positive impact on their authority, whilst 67 per cent thought this for the sector. More specifically:
 - Nearly three quarters of lead members thought that the support and resources had had a great or moderate positive impact on their authority (73 per cent), whilst just over half thought this for the sector (53 per cent).
 - A further nine per cent thought that there had been a small positive impact on their authority, and 14 per cent for the sector.

Directors were also asked about whether TEASC had had an impact on the ability to sustain this improvement work in the future. Again, the majority were positive about the impact on the sustainability of improvement work. Eighty nine per cent thought that there had been a positive impact on the sustainability of improvement work in their authority, whilst 83 per cent thought this for the sector. More specifically:

- Fifty eight per cent thought that the positive impact on the sustainability of improvement work in their authority had been great or moderate, whilst 61 per cent thought this for the sector.
- A further 32 per cent thought that there had been a small positive impact on their authority, and 22 per cent for the sector.

Driving improvement

Lead members were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “My authority’s adult social care department is making advances in driving improvement”.³⁸ All but two respondents stated that they thought that this was the case, with 97 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing. Respondents’ views on this were very similar in the baseline survey.

Directors were asked about current improvement activity: adult social care departments were undertaking a number of activities to understand performance and drive improvement. The activities most commonly conducted at the time of the survey (or in the 12 months previous) were:

- sharing information and innovative practice with others (96 per cent)
- analysis and benchmarking of performance data (96 per cent).

The results suggest that, overall, adult social care departments have maintained their level of improvement activities, with little significant change since the baseline survey. The only exceptions to this were:

- a decrease in the proportion developing leadership skills (75 per cent, down from 88 per cent in the baseline)

³⁸ 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 efficiency and productivity.

- an increase in the proportion inviting challenge from peers (58 per cent compared to 38 per cent in the baseline).

Local accountability

Ninety one per cent of directors' authorities had produced a local account for 2011/12 and/or 2012/13. These respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about their local account. Directors were positive about all of the statements, but the highest levels of agreement were with:

- "My council's local account acknowledges the areas requiring improvement and describes the actions to be taken" – 94 per cent agreed or strongly agreed.
- "My council's local account is based on a robust and reasonable self-assessment" – 94 per cent agreed or strongly agreed.

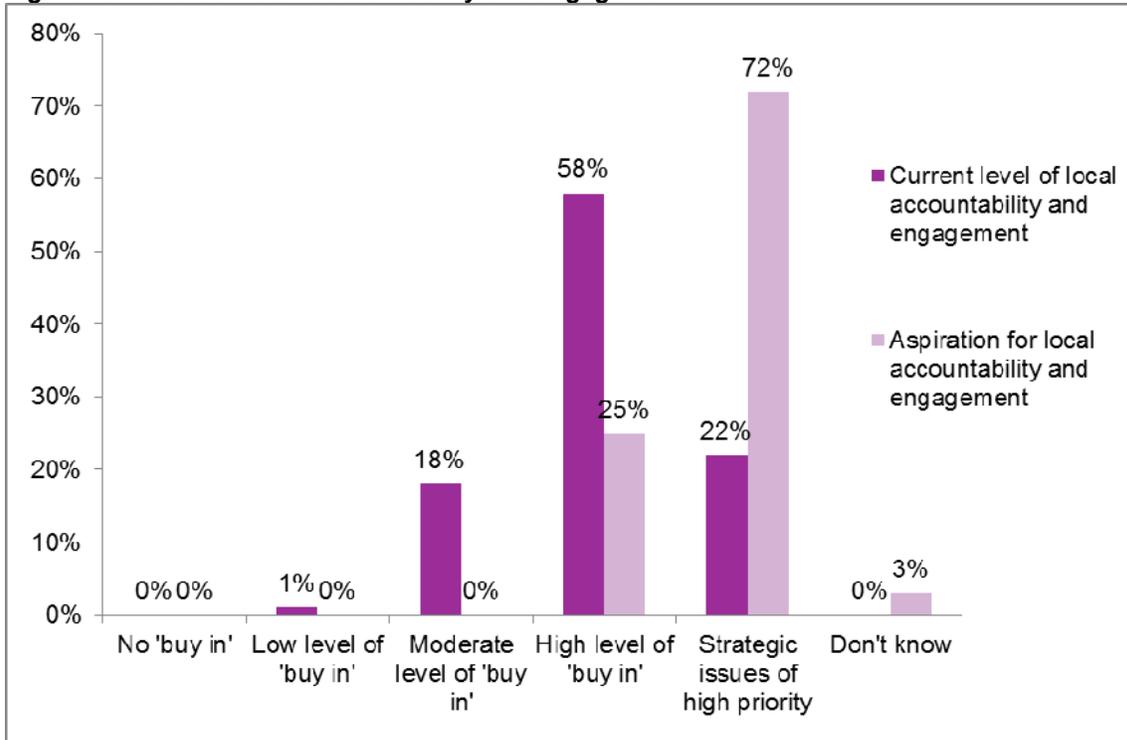
The lowest level of agreement was with the statement "My council's local account was informed by engagement with local people" – 78 per cent agreed or strongly agreed.

However, there was aspiration to continue to do better. Directors were also shown a scale depicting different levels of political and senior level 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity with adult social care service users and carers, 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 aspires to. Figure 10 shows the results.

Overall, four-fifths of respondents (80 per cent) thought their authority was currently at a 'high' or higher level of accountability and engagement. An analysis of individual responses shows that a third of directors (33 per cent) stated their authority was currently at the level it aspires to be at, whilst 64 per cent of respondents' authorities aspire to improve their level of local accountability and engagement with adult social care service users and carers. Nearly all directors (97 per cent) reported their authority sought to achieve or maintain 'high' or higher levels.

Figure 10: Levels of local accountability and engagement



Base: all respondents to the survey of directors (76)

Finally, lead members were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “Accountability to and engagement with adult social care service users and carers is strong in my authority”. As in the baseline, responses were positive; 90 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement (split evenly between those that agreed and strongly agreed).

The 38 lead members that did not answer ‘strongly agree’ were asked whether they see increasing accountability to and engagement with adult social care service users and carers as a priority for their authority’s adult social care department. The majority (32 respondents – 84 per cent) stated that increasing accountability and engagement was a high priority.

Evaluating sector-led improvement in children’s services

Two online surveys were undertaken to look at sector-led improvement in children’s services: one of directors of children’s services and one of lead members. A baseline survey was also conducted for each group a year previously.

Responsibility for sector-led improvement previously rested with the Children’s Improvement Board (CIB). However, in April 2013 the Department for Education withdrew its funding to CIB.

Important elements of CIB's previous work programme are now being taken forward by the LGA as part of its sector-led improvement offer to councils and the three organisations on CIB³⁹ are continuing to work together in partnership to support improvement. The purpose of this survey was to help ensure that the approach that has been developed post-CIB is meeting the needs of councils, and to shape decisions about the future support offer.

³⁹ The LGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executive and Senior Managers (SOLACE) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).

The results for each survey are summarised below (with any changes since the baseline also highlighted) and a full explanation of the findings and methodology can be found in Companion Report R (directors survey) and Companion Report S (lead members survey).

The directors' survey was sent via email to directors of children's services in all 152 councils with responsibility for this service in England, and was in the field over the course of January 2014. Responses were received from 73 directors – a response rate of 48 per cent.

The survey of lead members for children's services was in the field over the course of February and early March 2014. Responses were received from 74 lead members – a response rate of 49 per cent.

Skills and capacity for sector-led improvement

As Table 10 shows, respondents tended to be confident in the skills and capacity of both their own children's services department and of the sector to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.

Ninety six per cent of directors were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent. This overall level of confidence had not changed significantly since the baseline survey, although there was a shift towards more respondents saying they were confident to a moderate extent rather than to a great extent. Ninety six per cent of lead members were confident in their own authority to a great or moderate extent.

Eighty four per cent of directors and 69 per cent of lead members were confident in the sector to a great or moderate extent. Although lead members were noticeably more confident about their own authority than the sector in general, this was partly due to a higher proportion (15 per cent) answering 'don't know' for the sector.

Table 10: To what extent would you say you are confident that:				
	a) <u>Your own council's children's services department</u> currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?		b) <u>The local government children's services sector as a whole (i.e. across all councils)</u> currently has the necessary skills and capacity to monitor its own performance and continuously improve?	
	Directors	Lead members	Directors	Lead members
	%	%	%	%
To a great or moderate extent	96	96	84	69
To a great extent	36	55	16	9
To a moderate extent	60	41	67	59
To a small extent	3	4	15	14
Not at all	0	0	0	3
Don't know	1	0	1	15
Total	100	100	100	100

Base: all respondents (73 directors, 74 lead members)

Directors were asked to describe in their own words what impact, if any, withdrawal of CIB funding had had on the ability of their authority to monitor its own performance and continuously improve. Whilst a small number reported no impact, the examples given by the majority most commonly fell into three broad areas. They reported that:

- it is now more challenging to undertake activities such as benchmarking of data, peer support and sharing of best practice
- the withdrawal of CIB funding has put increased reliance and also pressure on regional support
- they now had some concerns around the sustainability of current work.

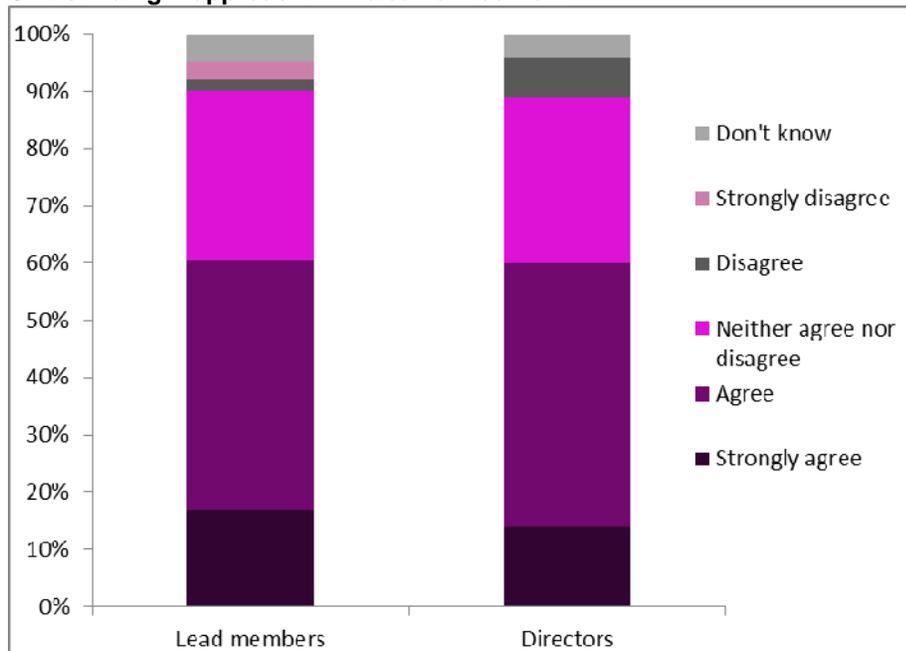
The approach to sector-led improvement in children’s services

Respondents were asked how much, if anything, they had heard about the approach to supporting sector-led improvement in children’s services post-CIB. Levels of awareness were fairly high amongst directors; 82 per cent of respondents had heard a lot or a moderate amount. Awareness amongst lead members was more varied; 62 per cent had heard a lot or a moderate amount about this, whilst a further 27 per cent had heard a little.

Those respondents who had some awareness of the approach to supporting sector-led improvement in children’s services post-CIB were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "the approach that has been developed to support sector-led improvement in children's services post-CIB is the right approach in the current context".

As Figure 11 shows, the majority agreed with the approach – 60 per cent of directors and 61 per cent of lead members strongly agreed or agreed. Of the remaining respondents, most were neutral (29 per cent of directors and 30 per cent of lead members neither agreed nor disagreed). As may be expected following the withdrawal of funding, levels of agreement were lower than when respondents were asked the same question about the CIB approach in the baseline survey, although this was reflected in an increase in the proportion of respondents answering ‘neither agree nor disagree’ rather than an increase in active disagreement.

Figure 11: Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: "The approach that has been developed to support sector-led improvement in children's services post-CIB is the right approach in the current context"



Base: all respondents that had heard at least a little about the approach or answered ‘don’t know’ (66 lead members, 72 directors)

Awareness of the different elements of the LGA support available to help the sector in taking the lead in its own improvement tended to be fairly high, particularly for the safeguarding peer review (92 per cent of directors and 89 per cent of lead members were aware). Directors also had high awareness of diagnostics for safeguarding, care and adoption (75 per cent), whilst lead members had high awareness of free leadership academy places for children's services lead members (85 per cent).

Expected impact of the approach

Respondents who had some awareness of the approach and support offer that has been developed to support sector-led improvement in children's services were asked the extent to which they thought that this would have a positive impact on the capacity of children's services, both within their own authority and across the local government sector as a whole, to monitor its own performance and continuously improve.⁴⁰

The majority were positive about the likely impact of the approach:

- Ninety three per cent of directors thought that there would be a positive impact on their children's services department, whilst 92 per cent thought that there would be a positive impact for the sector. More specifically:
 - Seventy one per cent of directors thought that there would be a great or moderate positive impact on their children's services department, with a further 22 per cent anticipating a small positive impact.
 - Sixty eight per cent of directors thought that there would be a great or moderate positive impact for the sector, with a further 24 per cent anticipating a small positive impact.
- Eighty eight per cent of lead members for children's services thought that there would be a positive impact on their children's services department, whilst 74 per cent thought that there would be a positive impact for the sector. More specifically:
 - Seventy nine per cent of lead members thought that there would be a great or moderate positive impact on their children's services department, with a further eight per cent anticipating a small positive impact.
 - Sixty seven per cent thought that there would be a great or moderate positive impact for the sector, with a further seven per cent anticipating a small positive impact.
- In all cases, the majority of remaining respondents answered 'don't know', with no more than one per cent anticipating no impact.

Driving improvement

Lead members were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "My authority's children's services department is making advances in driving improvement". Almost all respondents (96 per cent) stated that they thought that this was the case, with 53 per cent strongly agreeing and the remainder (43 per cent) agreeing. Views on this were very similar in the baseline survey.

⁴⁰ Unlike the corporate and adult social care surveys, this question asked about expected rather than achieved impact as the recent changes to the programme of support following withdrawal of CIB funding mean it is too soon to judge impact.

Directors were asked about current improvement activity; children's services departments were undertaking a number of activities to understand performance and drive improvement. The activities most commonly conducted at the time of the survey (or in the 12 months previous) were:

- analysis and benchmarking of performance data (93 per cent)
- sharing information and innovative practice with others (92 per cent).

The results suggest that, overall, children's services departments have maintained their level of improvement activities, with little significant change since the baseline survey. The only exception to this was developing leadership skills: 79 per cent said their authority was doing this; significantly lower than the 96 per cent that said this in the baseline survey.

Local accountability

Directors were presented with a number of activities that children's services departments might conduct to strengthen local accountability and to engage with service users to set local priorities, and were asked to state which, if any, of these activities their authority was conducting or planning to conduct.

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

- opening a dialogue with children and young people to get their views on current performance and to improve local services (88 per cent)
- consulting on particular proposals to get feedback and ideas (82 per cent).

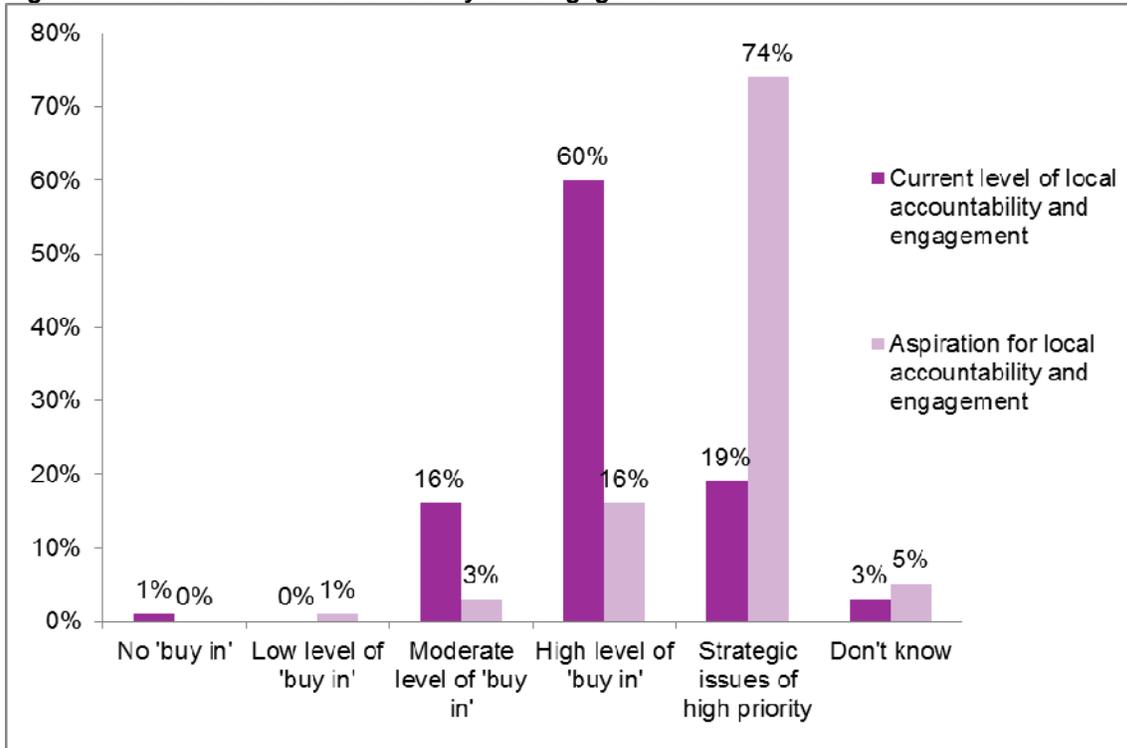
The results suggest that overall, children's services departments have maintained their level of local accountability activities, with little significant change since the baseline survey. The only exception to this was consulting on particular proposals to get feedback and ideas – although the proportion doing this remains high at 82 per cent, this is lower than in the baseline survey (93 per cent). However it is worth noting that a further 12 per cent do plan to do this within the next 12 months.

Directors were shown a scale depicting different levels of political and senior level 'buy in' to local accountability and engagement activity with children's service users, 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 aspires to. Figure 12 shows the results.

Overall, nearly four-fifths of respondents (79 per cent) thought their authority was currently at a 'high' or higher level of accountability and engagement. An analysis of individual responses shows that 29 per cent of respondents thought their authority was at the level it aspired to be at, whilst 67 per cent of respondents' authorities aspired to improve their level of accountability and engagement. Nine tenths of directors (90 per cent) reported their authority sought to achieve or maintain 'high' or higher levels.

Figure 12: Levels of local accountability and engagement



Base: all respondents to the survey of directors (73 respondents)

Finally, lead members were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “Accountability to and engagement with children’s service users is strong in my authority”. As in the baseline, responses were positive; 85 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

The 47 lead members that did not answer ‘strongly agree’ were asked whether they see increasing accountability to and engagement with children's service users as a priority for their authority's children's services department. The majority (33 respondents – 70 per cent) stated that increasing accountability and engagement was a high priority.

Annex A: Companion reports and related research

Companion reports

Throughout this report there are references to 'companion reports' which outline specific aspects of the evaluation activity in further detail. The companion reports can be found alongside this report at <http://www.local.gov.uk/research-performance-and-improvement>. Companion reports A - F were published alongside the first baseline report and can be found at the same link. The full list accompanying this report is as follows:

- Companion Report G: Data analysis
- Companion Report H: Survey on the views of senior members and officers
- Companion Report I: Survey of heads of policy and performance
- Companion Report J: Perceptions audit
- Companion Report K: LG Inform user feedback
- Companion Report L: Evaluation of the Leadership Academy
- Companion Report M: Evaluation of the LC Leadership Programme
- Companion Report N: Knowledge Hub survey
- Companion Report O: YouChoose survey
- Companion Report P: Survey of directors of adult social services
- Companion Report Q: Survey of lead members for adult social services
- Companion Report R: Survey of directors for children's services
- Companion Report S: Survey of lead members for children's services

Related research

To ensure a comprehensive assessment of sector-led improvement as a whole, elements of this evaluation have been expanded to include questions about adult social care and children's services. However in addition to this, separate evaluation activity is being undertaken to look at sector-led improvement in these areas, as well as planning, fire services and health and wellbeing, and these are outlined below.

Adult social care

Ayling and Marsh, 2013, Report on a review of the local accounts produced since August 2012⁴¹

Towards Excellence in Adult Social Care, 2013, Progress with adult social care priorities England 2012/13⁴²

Children's services

LGA research report, National Foundation for Educational Research, 2012, Evaluation of the early adopter sector-led improvement programme pilots⁴³

⁴¹<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/11663/Local+accounts+national+overview+report+2013/7ed04bd6-eda7-4dc5-a8d2-b610884144e8>

⁴²http://www.local.gov.uk/web/quest/adult-social-care/-/journal_content/56/10180/3374265/NEWS

LGA research report, National Foundation for Educational Research, 2013, The longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews⁴⁴

LGA research report, National Foundation for Educational Research, 2013, Evaluation of the sector-led peer challenge programme 2012/13⁴⁵

Health

Shared Intelligence, 2013, Change gear! Learning from the pilot health and wellbeing peer challenges⁴⁶

Shared Intelligence, 2014, Review of the health and wellbeing system improvement programme⁴⁷

Fire

Cardiff Business School, 2014, Evaluation of the Operational Assessment and fire peer challenge programme⁴⁸

Planning Advisory Service

Planning Advisory Service impact evaluation assessment – 2012/13 end of year report

⁴³ http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/research-education/-/journal_content/56/10171/3489923/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

⁴⁴ http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/research-education/-/journal_content/56/10171/3892624/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

⁴⁵ http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/research-education/-/journal_content/56/10171/3961621/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

⁴⁶ <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/49968/Change+Gear+-+learning+from+the+pilot+health+and+wellbeing+peer+challenges/06577543-1be0-4207-bb42-6214f931ac90>

⁴⁷ <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/11493/Shared+intelligence+interim+report+2014/cad110bb-74c3-4707-88b7-eda298916fb9>

⁴⁸ http://www.local.gov.uk/peer-challenges/-/journal_content/56/10180/3510552/ARTICLE



**Local Government Association
Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ**

**Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
Email info@local.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk**

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