



looking back moving forward:

accounts of council improvement by leading politicians



Local Government Association

concluding commentary by Davy Jones¹

introduction

In winter 2008, as part of analysing the impact of the seven years of the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) performance regime for local government, the IDeA carried out one-hour interviews with eight leaders and one elected mayor of different types of councils whose performance had dramatically improved over the previous few years. They followed in the wake of two seminal pieces of research focusing on the conditions for sustainable improvement previously published by the IDeA and LGA².

Knowing how they did it and capturing that learning is vital. Common themes leap out from the interviews: some obvious and previously documented, others more unexpected. Most will remain relevant for the foreseeable future. But the world moves on. Huge new challenges confront us all, and local government and its partners in particular. This concluding commentary attempts to map out the key learning points to date, and to identify what some of the main drivers for innovation and change will be in the future.

so how did they do it?

The interviews with council leaders about their 'improvement journeys' reflect some very different starting points but all make inspiring reading. While every story was different and unique to the location, common themes emerged.

external catalyst

Almost all the interviewed leaders identified the key role of an external judgement, generally inspection or the CPA, as a key catalyst for change. It was seen as a 'wake-up call', without which the impetus for dramatic radical improvement would have been much weaker.

"As an authority, we had to say we can't go on like this," said Councillor Iain Malcolm in South Tyneside. But equally important was the acceptance of that external judgement. Previously, it had been too easy to be in denial or complacent about the scale of the problems.

Despite the acknowledgement of the role of inspection, it is significant how often leaders also stressed that government targets were too prescriptive, inspections were too onerous and frequent, and that intervention following inspections caused serious damage, in addition to its benefits.

regime change

If accepting the external judgement was often the first step, then generally the next one was ensuring that change was led from the very top. Often this prompted the election of a new Leader who in turn brought in a new chief executive committed to making a step-change in improvement. In most cases it led to a transformation of leadership and management styles: a clarification of the appropriate and respective roles of members and officers, and an end to silo working and departments acting in isolation from one another. Unity of purpose around the need for significant improvement rather than 'tinkering at the edges' underpinned success in almost every case.

vision and purpose

Changes to the leadership and bringing staff on board would all have come to naught without the development of clear overall strategies and practical action plans. Leaders explained how important it was to project a vision of where they wanted to be and to translate the desire for change into a focused and determined set of steps to improve services. "Be very clear about what you want to do," says Councillor David Minnery of North Shropshire. Tackling difficult decisions 'head-on' and robust ongoing performance management were also identified as critical to ensuring the organisation kept on track towards the achievement of those goals.

staff as a key lever of change

With the leadership on board, the next task was to change the culture of the whole organisation and win the 'hearts and minds' of the staff. The importance attached to this by the leaders' interviews is striking. **"Because you can't expect staff to change without training them in the necessary skills,"** said Councillor Jill Shortland of Somerset. This was not just about internal communication and staff training and development.

It is clear that some leaders consider the improvement simply would not have happened unless staff had been convinced, encouraged and empowered to become the ambassadors of change. Building the capacity and professionalism of staff, boosting their pride in their work and rewarding them for success are themes across most of the interviews.

communications and partnership working

It has been well documented elsewhere that good communications with residents, service users and partners is a vital ingredient for improvement³. The leaders' interviews bear this out, with the emphasis on changing the reputation and image of the council to reflect its vision and commitment to change. Almost every significant local issue nowadays requires multi-agency working and solutions. Most leaders referred to the importance of improving relationships with their local partners.

In these examples, councils worked with other public private and voluntary sector partners to achieve service improvements and gave greater priority to the ongoing role of their local strategic partnership (LSP).

customer and citizen focus

But above all, the most consistent feature of the Leader interviews was the extent to which the organisation's focus was firmly reoriented towards its citizens and service users. Sometimes, this was symbolised by new, one-stop shop customer centres. In almost all cases, it meant getting closer to users and residents in a permanent and ongoing dialogue about their needs and preferences. It also involved imaginative and

simple ways to report back regularly to local citizens on how they had listened to their concerns. "We have faced the public in all sorts of situations, explained what we are doing, explained what choices we are making and tried to improve the quality and honesty of communications," said Councillor Peter Webb of North Dorset.

summary

What was surprising from the interviews was how similar were the key themes and steps identified by the leaders as crucial ingredients for success: an external 'wake-up call' and acceptance of the need to improve; political and managerial leadership; leaders' personal commitment to continuous

improvement; bringing staff on board for the change programme; clarity of vision and focus on performance; strong partnership working and good communications; and systematic focus on the needs of local people. But will these drivers be sufficient for the next ten years?

looking to the future

The case has already been made for why 'competence' is no longer a sufficient goal⁴. Climate change, globalisation and economic recession, tight public finances and substantial public debt, together with demographic changes and rising citizens' expectations will each require massive innovation and transformation. Taken together, the challenge is immense and the pace of

change will be exponential, creating greater risk and uncertainty. All these challenges point crucially to the role of local authorities and their partners to lead their localities. More 'sea changes in culture' (like that already achieved on performance management) are required. We have travelled a significant distance on the shift to multi-agency working and co-operation through LSPs but there is still more to do; the culture change of 'informing, consulting and involving' local citizens systematically is underway, but still has a way to go; and thinking low-carbon sustainable local communities is barely on the horizon for many local authorities.

Such transformations require large-scale behaviour change and local authorities are uniquely well-placed to bring about such changes. There are many issues which local authorities and their partners will face over the next five to 10 years, of which four stand out as key barometers of how seriously they flex their leadership muscle, and ensure the long-term sustainable transformation of their local communities.

can local government save the planet?⁵

Many, myself included, will argue that we are in danger of sleepwalking towards environmental and human catastrophe. Runaway and irreversible climate change is a stark and increasingly likely possibility. If this is the case, this fact dwarfs (and interacts with) all the other major social and economic issues of our time. While the climate change indicator is the fourth most popular one chosen in local area agreements (LAAs), nevertheless climate change is not currently the most hotly debated issue within most local authorities.

But this is likely to change dramatically as it becomes the single biggest driver for innovation and transformation over the next five to 10 years. Some local authorities have developed innovative low-carbon projects such as Kirklees' £20m investment in home insulation. But for most local authorities, their current involvement with climate changes ranges from support for high-level statements of intent (the Nottingham declaration) on the one hand, to a focus on practical issues such as the need to cut energy costs, increasing recycling and avoid landfill penalties on the other. This needs to be transformed into a wholesale reshaping of local communities and their behaviour to become

'low carbon', and redefining the local state to be fit for that purpose. This has begun modestly, for example the transition towns' movement, the Isle of Wight's 'Eco-Island' project, and Sutton's 'One Planet Borough'.

Ideally, I and others would argue that this focus on sustainability should be backed up by an over-arching statutory framework with appropriate powers and funding for all those providing local public services – including local authorities – to secure the long-term viability of their local communities socially, economically and environmentally.

With or without legal backing, as local communities devise their own unique and appropriate ways to become more sustainable, this will increasingly challenge the current balance in central/local relations. This could be what finally symbolises 'placeshaping' as what local authorities and LSPs uniquely do. National carbon footprint league tables are important, but the very nature of the local solutions developed will ultimately rest on the ownership of – and support from – local people, not the judgement of civil servants or inspectors.

Local government should be the 'natural' leader of the shift towards sustainable local communities, which in turn can be a powerful example to government and the rest of society. As the UK attempts to lead Europe and the rest of the world on tackling climate change, could local government find itself literally saving the planet?

the end of the market-driven economic boom

Much has already been written on the world's economic crisis and the end to the boom in local service expenditure. Clearly the hard economic choices facing councils and their partners are about to get that much harder. But the scale of the demographic changes we face – especially the

ageing population and the integration of new communities, together with rising consumer expectations – will also have profound effects on budgets and service provision. When all this is combined with the need to reconfigure services for a low-carbon community, it is clear that 'tinkering at the edges' is unlikely to provide solutions. Priorities and budgets need re-thinking from top to bottom. Dreadful as some of the consequences of recession may be, it also presents an opportunity to rethink local economic priorities.

Lurking beneath these important issues is a potentially more controversial point: is this the end of marketisation as the panacea saviour for local services?

The idea that private finance initiatives and contracting out to the lowest bidder will provide solutions to the next phase of challenges is being called into question. In the future, local authorities' commissioning roles will increasingly be geared towards outcomes, permeated by strong social, economic and environmental safeguards. Some may opt for the 'minimal hub' and multiple partnerships for service delivery model, but this could risk fragmentation and inefficiency, and challenge local accountabilities. Who would win out – shareholders or local citizens?

Indeed, I would argue that local authorities, reinforced by proposals for a much more formal role in economic intervention, will progressively intervene to deal with market failures, climate change and the needs of their local communities. Essex County Council's ground-breaking plans for taking over local post offices, massive investment in domestic renewable energy and setting up its own bank, are just the beginning of new locally and socially-driven innovations. This is providing municipal leadership for the 21st century. Will we see local authorities and their partners intervening in food markets, communications infrastructure and energy production? In some areas this will be part of a

conscious attempt to create a "green new deal"⁶ of job creation to restructure their local economies to be low-carbon, locally-focused and socially committed.

rebuilding trust by extending accountability

The undermining of trust in the banks and some parts of the private sector will not automatically translate into greater faith in public sector agencies. High-profile public concern about failures to safeguard children should serve as a salutary warning of the fragility of the reputation of local councils. Levels of trust in democracy and in politicians nationally and locally remain low. People seek strong leadership when faced with apparently insurmountable challenges – local authorities and

their partners will need to provide it.

This is not easy when central government still controls the purse strings of local services tightly, still sees local services as essentially the last link in a national delivery chain, using its departments to impose national targets on local communities. The comprehensive area assessment (CAA) being introduced jointly by the local service inspectorates from April 2009 may be a step forward over CPA judgements on councils, but it still wrongly implies that national agencies can best judge whether local authorities and their partners are delivering what is needed in local areas. The proposed new duty on councils to 'promote

democracy' has been welcomed by many. But with democracy comes accountability, as councillors well know. How can they reasonably be held accountable for outcomes in their local areas and communities, when other key partner agencies, who are responsible for so many local, regional and national outcomes, remain unaccountable? For example, government has dropped its proposal to elect 'community policing' representatives, but the problem remains that the council is the only democratically accountable element of the multi-agency partnership in the local area.⁷

As these partners increasingly share not only 'back office' processes but merge their functions directly, pressure will mount, in my view, over the next few years on government to move to "a single local commissioning model for public services"⁸, with either the council or the LSP having overall responsibility and being accountable at the ballot box.

citizens in the driving seat

All of which brings us neatly back to the key role of citizen engagement – already highlighted in the leaders' interviews. As the Power report⁹ and others have identified, the challenge for this century is to strike an important new balance between

representative democracy and participative, citizen-activated democracy. Councils have to be at the forefront of making this work in practice within and between local communities. The new 'duty to inform, consult and involve' for councils (and similar duties on other local service providers) is an important symbolic and legal milestone. The ongoing challenge is how councils get citizens to become more actively engaged. The scale of changes required to meet low-carbon living and an economic downturn simply cannot be made without a quantum leap in citizen and service user involvement in the process. In tough economic times, it becomes ever more crucial to involve citizens and service users in decision-making

– both to target services more effectively, and to strengthen community cohesion through greater transparency on the choices made about resource allocation.

All this information, consultation and involvement needs to be better joined up too. It will be important to audit existing engagement activity across LSP partners to achieve financial savings by eliminating duplication and ensuring a more efficient and strategic approach to engagement¹⁰. There is also scope to use a range of information technology to enthuse people who have never previously been involved in expressing preferences and making decisions about priorities, services and budgets.

We are moving beyond the consumerist model of local service users, towards recognising the collective interests of citizens in shaping their local communities. Personalised budgets are well and good, but need now to be linked to participatory and community budgeting. Empowering communities requires resources for the community and voluntary sectors that help to collectively organise and support them.

Similarly, recalling the political leaders' emphasis on the importance of staff involvement and training¹¹, there needs to be an investment in finding the right staff to deliver local services of the future and also recognition of the contribution of the trade

unions that can help to support and organise them¹².

The degree of behaviour change required to meet all the challenges outlined requires the public to become much more politicised and 'clued up' about local issues and their local communities. In addition, the complexity and harshness of the choices to be made demand much greater social, economic and environmental awareness of local people.

This cannot be achieved by central government. Only local authorities and their partners in alliances of local public service providers can hope to achieve this through providing strategic political leadership.

what next for improvement journeys and politicians as leaders of places?

The future is local: shaping low-carbon and low-consumption communities to meet the challenges of climate change and economic crisis. Local authorities are uniquely well placed to lead the behaviour change in local communities that is required to achieve these goals. But to do this, they have to reclaim their rightful place as the strategic leaders of localities – not just through lobbying government for more freedoms, but also through showing in practice that they have the support of their local communities in transforming their wellbeing.

Government recently published a report on the disappointing level of use of the 2000 local government Act's wellbeing powers. The Sustainable Communities Act has recently been passed to encourage further innovation. There is significant scope for local authorities to be much more radical in their thinking and their actions, so that they can lead their communities.

Where does regulation and inspection fit into this scenario? Progressively less and less is the answer. Of course, there will always be scope for value for money and probity audits of public expenditure, together with independent inspections of services for the vulnerable –

whether old or young. But having strong self awareness about performance, capacity and future challenges is the first step to delivering sustainable improvement, and the self-evaluation guidance developed by the IDeA and LGA will obviously take on increasing importance in the future. CAA may help in the short term to drive the citizen engagement agenda, though it would be more helpful if citizens were directly involved in shaping the area judgements. Whilst CAA will probably prove more effective than CPA in driving improved outcomes across local partnerships, the environmental and economic issues

discussed above will be far more powerful forces in reshaping local public services and communities than any assessment regimes.

Professor Richard Layard predicted¹³ that in 10 years time the Audit Commission would be inspecting local happiness, not performance. But in the long run, it is more politicised, knowledgeable and empowered citizens who will act as judge and jury of what happiness is, as well as being the effective regulator of the work and performance of local authorities and their partners¹⁴.

endnotes

- ¹ Davy Jones is a freelance consultant working on local public service issues (www.davyjonesconsultancy.co.uk) he was invited to contribute a concluding commentary in a personal capacity, and this piece is his opinion, not LGA/IDeA policy.
- ² Tavistock Institute and Warwick Business School, Beyond competence – driving local government improvement, LGA, 2005, and Clive Grace and Steve Martin, Getting better all the time, IDeA, January 2008
- ³ The Reputation of local government, LGA publication, September 2008
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- ⁸ Getting to the heart of local accountability, LGIU publication, June 2008
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- ¹⁰ IDeA and Consultation Institute, Comprehensive Engagement Strategies courses, 2008 and forthcoming IDeA/NAVCA/Urban Forum publication
- ¹¹ Councillor Peter Webb, North Dorset interview
- ¹² Hilary Wainwright and Mat Little, Unison Compass and Transnational Institute, January 2009
- ¹³ Audit Commission lunchtime seminar, 2007
- ¹⁴ <http://www.youngfoundation.org.uk/our-work/local-innovation/strands/wellbeing/the-local-wellbeing-project/local-wellbeing-project>
- ¹⁵ Source: Audit Commission, www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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