

Setting the pace

Developing a framework for sector-led help

Consultation paper



This consultation document suggests a new framework for self-improvement for local authorities in England.

It proposes a greater role for local authorities in owning and sharing amongst themselves the responsibility for their own improvement.

That would mean a changed role for the regional and national improvement bodies, and a reduction in the role of central government and regulators.

We are working to ensure maximum engagement in the consultation process.

You can take part before the consultation closes on 1 July 2009 by:

Contributing to the online consultation at www.idea.gov.uk/settingthepace

You can access copies of the full consultation document there, by calling 020 7296 3131 or emailing settingthepace@idea.gov.uk

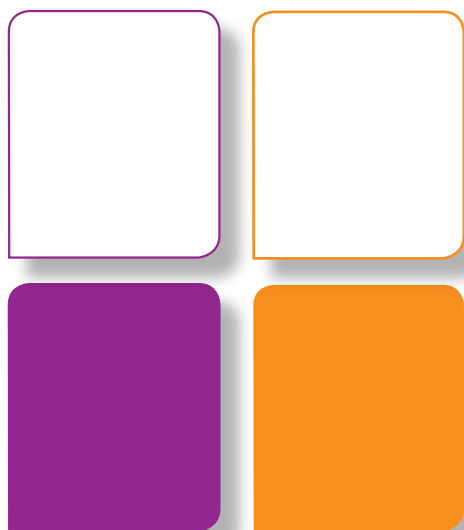
If you wish to discuss this further, please contact your IDeA Regional Associate www.idea.gov.uk/regionalassociates

Written submissions should be sent to
Setting the Pace Consultation
Improvement and Development
Agency, Layden House
76-86 Turnmill Street
London EC1M 5LG

Or by emailing settingthepace@idea.gov.uk

The challenge we face

1. Local government can demonstrate an enviable track record of improvement over recent years. There is however no room for complacency.
 - The new regulatory framework – comprehensive area assessment – may expose new weaknesses as different aspects of performance will be evaluated.
 - The current economic crisis means authorities face a squeeze between rising need in their communities and declining resources to meet them.
 - But can local government's current approach to improvement deliver enough capacity to turn things around, corporately or at a service level, when there are serious failings in high risk areas?
 - Without a clear framework ministers are left to respond in an interventionist way where an authority is seen to be in crisis or after an avoidable tragedy.
2. This consultation aims to stimulate a debate about what kind of an approach local government should collectively be taking to help those authorities that face particular difficulties, such as serious weaknesses in services or corporate governance.
 - For authorities - we want to know how far a sector-led approach should go and how fast. Is it about doing what we currently do, but doing it better: more corporate or service specific support and more capacity to turn things around? Or do we need all authorities to commit to a comprehensive set of arrangements which are designed to spot and prevent all potential service or corporate failure?
 - For government and regulators - we want to know how a more clearly local government-led approach will work effectively with them, particularly in the most challenging circumstances such as when, as is still occasionally the case, an authority has a combination of corporate weaknesses and service failures.
3. Local Government needs to introduce a clearer framework that describes how it will work to overcome the particular difficulties that any authority may, at some time face.



4. For the framework to be effective four factors are critical:

- Identifying early warning signs of difficulty because a failure anywhere impacts on the reputation of local government as a whole
- Building trust and confidence in political and officer peers in order to provide real challenge to struggling authorities
- Recognising the importance of political ownership because the ultimate responsibility for improvement lies with elected politicians
- A clearer framework of support architecture that is flexible and not overly bureaucratic so local government can solve its own problems first.

Towards a new sector-led help framework

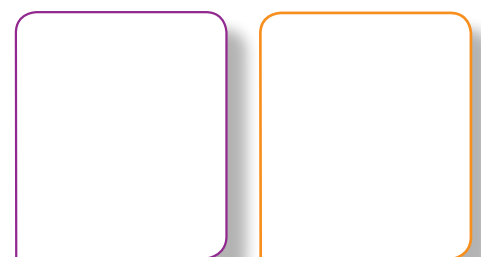
5. The framework we propose would give the flexibility to maximise the improvement support resources needed to match local circumstances. It is based on clear arrangements to allow corporate and service weaknesses to be anticipated, identified and dealt with. In summary, the framework would operate in the following way:

- Authorities continually monitor their own performance, undertake a self-evaluation every year and a peer-led external challenge of corporate health every three to four years
- The vast majority of performance issues will be dealt with routinely by authorities themselves or with external commercial or public sector support
- RIEPS monitor the improvement challenges of authorities in their region and in particular identify emerging serious performance difficulties, drawing on intelligence from a range of sources including other improvement bodies, regulators and government
- The IDeA, working closely with the RIEPs, acts as a confidential clearing house for sensitive issues
- Where actual or potential performance difficulties are identified, the RIEP facilitates discussions with the authority and other stakeholders leading to agreement on the way forward and appropriate improvement support
- The IDeA facilitates peer support and direct help if needed

- Where the difficulties have an otherwise intractable political cause or dimension, the LGA may need to broker discussions with appropriate politicians
- Higher performing authorities and services make available officers and members to help the authority in difficulties
- If a situation is reached where a government department is contemplating an improvement notice or using other intervention powers, a meeting is first called with the relevant authority (including the relevant politicians), the RIEP and other appropriate sector improvement bodies, to see whether, as an alternative, an effective sector-led approach is feasible.

6. So we would all need to do things differently:

- Authorities to sign a commitment to self evaluation and peer challenge, and provide the peers and knowledge needed to support other authorities
- RIEPS to tailor their local approach to prevention and support, and develop clear models for prevention monitoring and coordinating support
- IDeA to coordinate national improvement support, act as a confidential clearing house for concerns and develop enough robustly accredited peers
- LGA to monitor whole system architecture, challenge authorities if political leadership is causing failure, and support authorities in conflict with government
- Government and regulators to agree not to intervene before the authority and the sector have tried to rectify the issues, provide monitoring data to the regional and national bodies and progressively step back over time from monitoring and support.



Key Consultation Questions

Complete questions available in full consultation document and online at

www.idea.gov.uk/settingthepace

Consultation question 1

To what extent should a sector-led help framework seek to address issues across local partnerships as well as within authorities?

Consultation question 3

Has the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy met the original expectations of clarifying the improvement architecture and devolving responsibility for improvement to local government, leading to improved support and better outcomes for citizens?

Consultation question 6

Is the protection of the reputation of local government as a whole sufficient incentive for councillors and officers to agree to take responsibility for providing support in another authority?

Consultation question 8

Does your authority support the idea of greater local government-led support, with a view to reducing the regularity burden, and would it be prepared to sign a commitment to that effect?

Consultation question 11

Are the peer-led models of improvement currently used by the sector robust enough to meet the new challenges this framework suggests? If not, how would they need to be improved?

Consultation Question 14

Who should begin the dialogue with an authority about the need for support if they themselves do not seek it?

Consultation Question 15

What assurance can we provide that the sector will be sufficiently robust and challenging of itself? Can we provide sufficient incentive to 'coasting' authorities to improve?

Consultation question 17

This framework involves enhanced roles and responsibilities for all five parts of the current system. Would it still work if any one part was not playing its full role?

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Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

