

Improvement and the use of Local Public Service Agreements – lessons from Kent and Middlesbrough

A joint NLGN and IDeA publication

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Foreword

The Government is committed to the improvement of public services. However, we will not achieve the changes we want unless we work in true partnership with local government. Local authorities have a key role to play in improving the quality of public services, and in making sure that they are responsive to the needs of local communities.

Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) offer a radical partnership tool for enabling local authorities to drive local change. Councils have considerable freedom to address the issues which they identify as priorities for their areas, and there are financial rewards and freedoms for the successful attainment of agreed sets of targets.

This report emphasises the lessons to be learnt from two very different authorities that have both succeeded in achieving real and sustainable improvement for their communities in the early stages of their LPSAs. It highlights practical lessons drawn from the honest experiences of councils who are committed to delivering real change for their communities.

Middlesbrough Council and Kent County Council are at the forefront of change in local government. Both councils were among the 20 pilot authorities in the first round of LPSAs and have demonstrated their ability to maximise the benefits that the process can offer. They have taken very different approaches to delivering real improvements to their communities, but have both succeeded in producing tangible results. The stringent processes which each authority has in place will no doubt continue to drive improvements over the LPSA cycle.

The lessons learnt from both case studies will offer useful insights for any authority which is already engaged in, or is to become engaged in, the LPSA process. It compares and contrasts two very different authorities with different problems that are both successfully tackling deprivation and social challenges using different strategies.

I am therefore pleased to recommend this report, and the work of both the NLGN and IDeA in identifying and disseminating examples of good practice which will be invaluable to local government and its partners.

Phil Hope MP

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Summary

1 INTRODUCTION

This report is the second output of the NLGN Innovation Network's Knowledge Exchange series¹. It identifies key lessons about the use of Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) as a tool in the wider improvement process of two leading councils. It presents and illustrates these lessons in a practical way for managers facing similar challenges in their own organisations. The case studies were explored through Knowledge Exchange visits – intensive 24-hour programmes with a working group of peers.

2 LEARNING FROM MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL AND KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

These two councils were selected for study because of their recognised achievements in maximising the benefits the LPSA process can offer and integrating them into their wider improvement agendas. There are a number of similarities in the councils' approaches; however, there are also a number of differences which are the result of the circumstances and priorities of each authority. The focus of the visits – 'Performance through Partnership' in Middlesbrough and 'Living LPSAs – Achievable or Over-Ambitious?' in Kent, was to understand the reasons for these differences in approach and the context in which decisions were taken.

¹ First established in June 2001, NLGN's Innovation Network is a small group of ambitious local authorities interested in the change agenda. The Innovation Network was formerly known as the Innovation Forum and renamed following the ODPM's decision to adopt the same term for its grouping of councils rated excellent in the December 2002 Comprehensive Performance Assessment. NLGN has long been of the view that innovation is evident in local authorities that would not automatically be ranked 'excellent' and the Innovation Network is open to all councils who wish to share knowledge and expertise and influence public policy across all levels of government. For further information, visit the Innovation Network at www.nlgn.org.uk

3 UNSCRAMBLING IMPROVEMENT – KEY POINTS FOR IMPROVEMENT DRIVERS

Improvement requires the identification of difference between the current and desired state of play, and the desire to close this gap. Each of the case study authorities had different drivers for improvement, and this section draws on lessons from the case studies to consider the routes to establishing an improvement agenda and driving improvement results.

4 DIFFERING ROUTES, SAME INGREDIENTS – STRATEGIC PARTNERING FOR DELIVERING LPSA TARGETS

This section discusses key aspects of the partnership approaches to LPSAs undertaken by the case study authorities. Organised under the threads of the IDeA's Improvement Model, this section considers the role of leadership, dialogue with partners, political and democratic engagement, partnership and procurement, organisation and people, culture change and motivation and customer and community focus.

5 INNOVATION

The final section presents some different ways of thinking about innovation, including key characteristics of innovative authorities developed by NLGN's Innovation Network. Examples of particularly innovative practice from each case study authority are given.

6 APPENDICES

The agendas and attendance lists for the two visits are given in this section, as well as the feedback from group discussion which was presented to each hosting council at the end of each visit.