



# Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda

## **The State of Local Services: Performance Improvement in Local Government**

Executive Summary





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The findings and recommendations in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or proposed policies of Communities and Local Government.

Steve Martin  
Centre for Local & Regional Government Research, Cardiff University

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Department for Communities and Local Government

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Department for Communities and Local Government  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London SW1E 5DU  
Telephone: 020 7944 4400  
Website: [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

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LS23 7NB  
Tel: 0870 1226 236  
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# Introduction

The research reported in this summary has been conducted as part of a long-term Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda; the 20-plus policies that followed the 1998 and 2001 white papers. The aim of this evaluation has been to assess the cumulative impacts of the individual policies over the 1998-2007 period, identify the initiatives that have been key enablers of desired change, and highlight synergies and conflicts between the policies. This work was commissioned by Communities and Local Government (then the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister) in 2002 from a research team led by the Centre for Local & Regional Government Research at Cardiff University. This paper builds on previous work published in 2005<sup>1</sup> and brings together evidence from:

- statutory performance measures
- CPA results
- surveys of senior local authority officers and councillors undertaken by the Cardiff research team
- in-depth interviews with local authority officers and councillors in a sample of local councils and representatives of other local agencies which work closely with these authorities conducted by the research team; and
- data on public satisfaction

It analyses:

- levels of improvement in local government services since 2000/2001
- external and internal influences on improvement
- barriers to improvement; and
- implications of our analysis for future local government policies

## Policies and Policy Objectives

The last decade has witnessed an unprecedented attempt to transform the policies and performance of English local government. The study of which this paper is part has focused on the impacts of the policies that were associated with the 1998 and 2001 Local Government white papers, which came to be known collectively as the 'local government modernisation agenda'. This particular paper examines changes in the quality and responsiveness of local public services, an issue which has been right at the heart of the 'modernisation agenda' as well as the principles and proposals set out more recently in the government's 2005 Ten Year Strategy for Local Government, the 2006 white paper and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Martin S.J. and A.G. Bovaird (2005), *Meta-evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda: Progress Report on Service Improvement in Local Government*, CLG.

## Theories of Improvement

There are a number of key theories and ideas about improvement which have informed the policies associated with the 1998 and 2001 white papers and continue to be important to policies that are being implemented in the wake of the 2006 white paper.

The Government's principles of public services reform and the model, published in 2006, which built upon and elaborated these have provided an overall framework. Underlying this model are three important assumptions:

- sustained improvement requires effective leadership and 'corporate capacity'
- local authorities require external stimuli in order to improve; and
- different 'improvement tools' and combinations of 'tools' are appropriate in different contexts

## Changes in Performance

There is strong evidence of significant improvements in many local government services between 2000 and 2006.

### **National performance indicators**

Communities and Local Government's analysis of a group of national performance indicators which it believes are a good indication of the overall performance of local government suggests that there was an improvement of 21.9 per cent between 2000-2001 and 2005-2006.

The largest improvements have been in waste and culture services. There were more modest improvements in housing, planning, community safety, benefits administration and social services. Levels of improvement in the selection of indicators relating to education were smaller than those for other services.

### **CPA scores**

There has been a steady increase in the numbers of authorities judged to be in the top two categories by the CPA. By 2006 78 per cent of councils were ranked as 3 or 4 star (compared to 70 per cent in 2005) and for the first time no authorities at all were placed in the lowest CPA category.

### **Reported performance**

Surveys of local authority officers undertaken by the research team between 2001 and 2006 also indicate that there has been a significant improvement in most local government services, but that the rate of improvement in some services has slowed during the last two years.

Like the Department's selection of national performance indicators, the survey data suggest that there were variations between services. There has been a rapid improvement in reported performance in environment services and education also improved relatively rapidly, particularly in terms of value for money and efficiency. By contrast, culture and leisure services and housing improved slowly relative to other services in terms of almost all of the six dimensions of performance that we analysed.

In-depth interviews in 12 case study authorities revealed a mixed picture of improvement. There were variations between services and between councils. All of these authorities were able to point to significant improvements in the quality and effectiveness of some services. Most had managed to turn round some poorly performing services over the last five years, but reported that some were proving more difficult to improve.

### **Public satisfaction**

Analysis of BVPI surveys suggests that public satisfaction with the overall performance of local authorities and the way in which they handled complaints declined between 2000-01 and 2003-04 but then levelled off over the following three years.

Satisfaction rates with individual services vary considerably, but most services recorded increased levels of satisfaction between 2003-04 and 2006-07. The exceptions were household waste collection, theatres and concert halls, and museums and galleries.

According to the BVPI surveys, London boroughs have made particularly impressive progress in improving public satisfaction, albeit from a lower base than other councils.

In some case studies members of the public who participated in focus groups conducted by the research team praised improvements in education services, but most were primarily interested in employment prospects in the area and issues of graffiti, anti-social behaviour and tipping and saw authorities as having a mixed record on these issues. Council tax increases also loomed large in some focus group discussions.

## **Influences on improvement**

The evidence from this and other studies commissioned by the Department suggests that there have been significant changes in organisational culture and processes in local authorities in recent years. These have included:

- more effective leadership by officers and/or elected members
- an increased focus on improvement
- investment of additional resources in services
- robust performance management systems
- improved consultation with users and the public at large; and
- a greater willingness to work in partnership with other agencies

These changes are seen by local authority officers as having helped to encourage improvement.

The evidence suggests that the local government policies implemented by the Department between 2001 and 2006 have helped to encourage these internal changes and led to a strong focus on improvement at local level.

Four policies are perceived to have had the most significant impact on improvement between 2001 and 2006: CPA, the E-Government strategy, Local Public Services Agreements and the Best Value regime. The perceived importance of Best Value declined as the Government and Audit Commission gave less emphasis to it, whilst the significance of CPA and LPSAs (and more recently LAAs) increased over time.

Many interviewees and survey respondents felt that the policies of different Government departments were not sufficiently 'joined up'. However, there was a widespread view that the narrower set of policies associated with the 1998 and 2001 local government white papers constituted a coherent package of initiatives. Respondents reported that service inspections, CPA, LPSAs and LAAs and the Beacon Scheme interacted in ways which encouraged improvement, and many also told us that Local Strategic Partnerships, the power to promote well being and the Innovation Forum had encouraged improvement.

There were complaints from local authorities concerning what they regarded as 'initiative overload'. Inspection in particular was generally seen as time consuming and costly. However, many interviewees also acknowledged that the external challenge and support provided by central government policies had been essential in leading to changes that would not otherwise have happened or would have occurred much more slowly.

## Barriers to improvement

Authorities identified a range of internal constraints to improvement within their authorities and highlighted what they saw as four aspects of government policies which had been unhelpful:

- initiative overload – resulting from too many central government initiatives and too many changes in policies
- too much central prescription and regulation
- insufficient joined up working across central government; and
- ring fencing and other restrictions on how resources could be spent

## Implications for future policy

The evidence suggests that government policies have played an important role in encouraging improvement in local authority services since 2000/2001, and the broad thrust of its policies appears to have been appropriate given the government's objectives until now.

But there have been a number of drawbacks with the approaches that have been taken between 2001 and 2006, and future policies will need to take account of these and of the changes that have taken place within local government – in particular improvements in the performance and capacity of local government – as well as important developments in the wider context within which local councils now operate such as:

- recent changes in the national performance framework
- a more difficult financial climate
- variations between different services and localities; and
- challenges associated with securing greater public involvement and the increased use of markets.

For further information on this research, and a copy of the full report, contact:

Local Governance Research Unit  
Communities and Local Government  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London SW1E 5DU  
Tel: 020 7944 4400

Email: [lgresearch@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:lgresearch@communities.gsi.gov.uk)

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