



Final Evaluation of the North East Improvement Partnership

North East Improvement Partnership

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Improvement Partnership (IP) for North East Local Government was established in July 2005 as one of nine regional partnerships receiving central government with funding for capacity building, allocated to March 2008. The IP included all 25 local authorities and the four Fire and Rescue Services in the North East.

Elected members of the Association of North East Councils (ANEC) delegated day to day governance of the IP to a Steering Group made up largely of Chief Executives of authorities. The Steering Group took an important early decision adopt a collaborative regional approach by commissioning improvement activity rather than simply distributing grant funding to bidding authorities.

The Steering Group appointed a Programme Team comprising a Programme Manager and Programme Officer (both seconded from the Association of North East Councils (ANEC) and joined in 2007 by a Programme Support Officer. The Delivery Plan 2006-2008 was agreed in November 2005. The programme's workstreams were agreed as follows:

- Leadership: skills development for the modern elected Member and for corporate top teams
- Workforce capacity: building capacity of third and fourth tier officers
- Performance management: embedding a performance management culture
- Communicating local government: improving communications within authorities and enhancing reputation
- Essential development support: grant funding to address specific improvement needs through a bidding for funding process
- District Vision: capacity building programme for District Councils
- Challenge and Inspire: exploring innovations and ideas for improvement through one-off events and seminars

Uniquely amongst regional improvement partnerships, the IP embarked on a longitudinal process and impact evaluation of its work in order to inform the ongoing process and measure its overall impact. This Executive Summary outlines key issues, learning and recommendations, based on the evaluation findings.

Context

The three year period in which the IP was operating, 2005-2008, was one of considerable change in terms of local government at both national and regional levels (Chapter 2). Key changes included:

- the disbanding the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister and the establishment of the Department for Communities and Local Government;
- the publishing of the White Paper, Strong Prosperous Communities (October 2006) on the future role and structure of local government;
- the invitation to bid for unitary status leading to the decision to establish two new unitary authorities in the North East, in Durham and Northumberland : in effect reducing the number of local authorities in the area from 25 to 12 with the new authorities to be in place by 1 April 2009;
- the increasing emphasis, seen in the White Paper, on better value for money, clearer outcome-setting and improved services for local people;
- an increased focus on planning through Local Area Agreements with area public sector partners and the shift to measuring performance of place rather than individual organisation performance.

The work of the IP and its evaluation is set against this changing context. In order to assess the IP fairly however the report stresses the importance of relating to the original objectives and intended outputs and outcomes.

The Evaluation Process

The evaluation framework incorporated a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, which were flexibly adapted to match the workstream projects that evolved through the lifetime of the programme (Chapter 3). The methods used included data gathering from secondary sources to establish baseline information, ongoing documentary analysis, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (including with representatives of each local authority and Fire and Rescue Service), an on-line survey to all participants, feedback information from each event, and telephone interviews with a sample of participants.

Value for Money

The overall cost of the IP is £5.3 million. Programme management costs (including promotion and communication costs) have been deliberately kept low at around 7% of the total programme: a very good ratio of administration to delivery costs. These low costs were enabled as a result of the high levels of active and practical support and engagement from key officers in authorities and other stakeholders, who effectively assisted the delivery of the programme.

Retaining and maximising such support was a key factor in the culture of the IP fostered by the Steering Group and Programme Team.

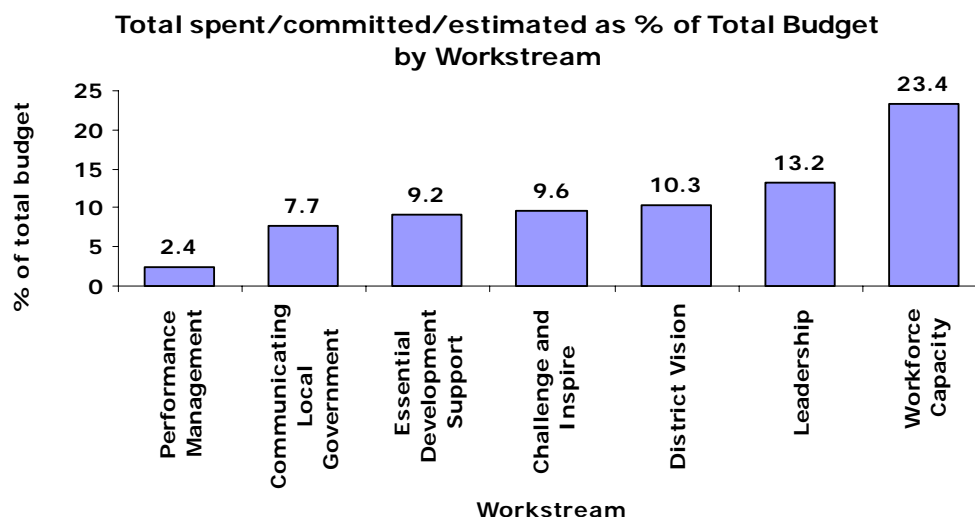
The programme offer was of consistently high quality (Chapter 9- 16, sections on quality) which at the outset had been one of the key criteria many authorities wanted to see. The offer included a very wide range of opportunities from single one-to-one coaching through to major conferences and events.

In terms of reach, all 29 local authorities/fire and rescue services have participated and that they have received value ranging from £20-£160,000 with an average of around £86,000. Twenty three out of 29 authorities were involved in the governance of the IP.

Overall (up until December 2007) there were 4,296 participant attendances: 1,079 Member and 3,217 officer attendances (the number of participants may be less than this as some people attended more than one event).

*"The IP gives good value and outstanding tuition."
(Member)*

The ratio of available funding spent on each workstream is shown in the chart below.



The chart shows that the highest spending workstream was Workforce Capacity (Chapter 10) with almost twice as much as the next nearest workstream spend. This contains several large scale projects, including NEEM (see below) and the on-line recruitment portal. The lowest spending workstream was Performance Management, which did not achieve its intended outputs and part of its funding vired to reserves in 2007 (Chapter 11).

The most costly single project in the Programme was the North East Excellent Managers (NEEM) leadership development course. This trained 628 middle managers at a cost of £785,310 giving a cost per participant of £1,250, which compares favorably with other national programmes with similar content. (Other elements of the Programme were more expensive in terms of the investment per individual, including some of the senior officer and Member leadership development courses supplied by third parties and piloted by the IP.) Given the success of the NEEM course in terms of quality and impact (Chapter x), it can be assessed as providing good value for money. To extract the maximum value from NEEM, however, each authority will need to ensure that they support managers and enable them to apply new skills and continue to develop. The need for such follow-through has been highlighted in this evaluation as a key aspect of the IP which requires further emphasis in future.

Assets

The IP has created some assets that will continue to exist after its own work is completed:

- Member role descriptions and competency frameworks;
- on-line recruitment portal;
- Learning Pool;
- Careers in Councils website;
- the various networks;
- research commissioned, for example by the Communicating Local Government workstream
- the evaluation data, which could be used as baseline data for the next programme.

Legacy

There are a number of less tangible results from the IP that will remain, like the assets, after its work has concluded. These include:

- the networks (both formal and informal) that have been created/supported;
- the engagement by so many people and the energy this has created around the improvement agenda;
- the increased capacity/skills/knowledge at different levels within the organizations;

- the increased collaboration between individuals and authorities which, in the light of local government re-structuring, has had some unintended benefits in that people have trained/attended events together and may now find themselves working together;
- improvement and the importance of culture change is now firmly on the agenda for both officers and for members too;
- there is a strong sense, not quantifiable, that confidence to take risks, to tackle issues has been increased.

Overall, the evaluation team's assessment is that the IP has delivered good value for money: there have been high quality inputs, it has attracted a good level of participation, there are significant impacts, assets have been created and the whole has been delivered efficiently in terms of management costs. There is a lasting, less tangible, legacy that will have ripple effects in the future.

Outputs

The table below summarise the main activities in each workstream.

Workstream	Main Outputs
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 312 Members received Personal Development Plans • 148 Members received training under the leadership workstream • Increase in number of authorities signed up to Member Development Charter from 15 to 21 • Four authorities received funding for top team development • 29 successful bids for senior officer coaching • 23 senior officers from 17 authorities/fire and rescue services on advanced leadership courses • 37 officers trained at regional assessment centre • Member role descriptions and competency frameworks • Learning Pool (60 active users)
Workforce Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OD diagnosis in 27 local authorities and FRSS • 628 middle managers received training under the North East Excellent Managers (NEEM) programme for middle managers • OD Regional Capacity Building Programme (ongoing) • On-line Recruitment Portal



Blake Stevenson

Creative Research **Creating** Action

Workstream	Main Outputs
Performance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LAA project with PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) • Fire and rescue Services project with PWC
Communicating Local Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network for PR/communications specialists • 121 Members and officers received communications and media skills training • Best practice (ShiNE awards) event • Increase in local authorities signed up to Local Government Reputation campaign from four to 21 • Careers in Councils campaign and website
Essential Development Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for projects within authorities allocated through a bidding process (26 were allocated to 16 authorities)
District Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Series of workshops delivered on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - value for money - equalities and diversity - community engagement
Challenge and Inspire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Challenge and Inspire seminars, workshops and events attracted nearly 1,400 attendees, over 400 of which were Members. • NE Learning Network

Most of the workstreams achieved their intended outputs established at the outset of the programme (Chapters 9-16). The exception to this was the Performance Management workstream which struggled to attain buy-in from authorities (Chapter 11).

Over and above achieving their intended outputs the workstreams were generally perceived as having been of high quality and relevance. The careful way in which the IP established its programme, taking time to decide what should be contained within each one, was seen as an important contributory factor in this success and where there had been more in-depth preparatory work, such as in workforce capacity, there was a sense that this had produced even higher quality results.

“Activities have built capacity, given members a clearer understanding of their role, improved external and internal relationships and increased corporate responsibility.”
(Chief Executive)

Impact on Individuals

It is clear that several thousand individuals in the North East have been involved in a variety of different ways in the IP programme of improvement. The overall results from the IP evaluation suggest that there has been significant impact on individuals who have participated in the IP's learning opportunities from the conferences and seminars, the training and development, the NEEM course and through involvement in the IP's governance and supported networks (Chapter 5). The impact has involved new learning and skills, greater confidence, improvements in practice in the job, increased networking and, to a lesser extent, an ability to handle change in the individual's organization.

The evaluation evidence suggests that one of the key impacts on individuals has been ***an increase in knowledge and skills***. In particular the evidence highlights the positive impact that the NEEM programme had on the skills and knowledge of middle managers and there was a strong sense that there was a need to build on this by supporting those who had received the training to use their new skills and knowledge back in their workplace (Chapter 10).

The evidence suggested that Members who had attended training had benefited even more than the officers from their attendance: the ratings from Members were generally higher than those from officers, suggesting that the various courses met a particular need for Members who attended. (Chapter 5, Table 5.3). Some of the qualitative feedback suggested that those who participated benefited a lot but that sometimes it was those who could most benefit from training who did not attend and that ways to overcome this issue need to be examined. (Chapter 5, p.60)

In addition to increased skills and knowledge one of the key impacts has been in relation to ***increased confidence*** which is self-reported but also commented on by senior officers (ref X).

"The course gave me the tools and confidence to make the changes I have been putting off. Had these changes not been made I doubt I would still be in the same job."
(Middle Manager)

One of the impacts of the IP on individuals was allowing them ***access to opportunities*** that they would otherwise not have had: in particular individuals in the smaller councils and the fire and rescue services appear to have benefited from this greater access (Chapter 6).

All the events and training courses offered by the IP have allowed individuals ***to network and to make useful contacts***, often of an informal nature. There is

evidence that these informal contacts have been used to find out information and share practice (Chapter 5).

Some individuals have seen ***specific benefits to their own career***: with examples given of someone who said the training had helped them keep their current job to someone who thought the training had improved their career prospects. Given the changing local government structures many people expressed the view that it had been beneficial to have received this input of development for themselves as individuals at this particular time. (Chapter 5).

"I believe that a recent promotion was as a result of participation in the programme. The programme made me think about what is required of a manager."
(Middle Manager)

Some thought that the events and training had prepared them ***to handle change better***, although this perception tended to be higher in the fire and rescue services than the local authorities. (Chapter 5).

There is evidence that individuals are ***changing their practice and making improvements*** as a result of the IP inputs they have received: this is true of senior officers (for example those involved in the Changing Culture pilot) to members to middle managers. (Chapter 5).

The single event that had the greatest impact on individuals (based on qualitative feedback) was the Ben Page seminar: this clearly had a lasting impact on individuals which led to impacts within authorities (one authority stated it had re-shaped the way it communicates with its public as a result.)

Impact on Authorities

All authorities have participated in the IP programme and this can be quantified in terms of the value of that investment: ten have had high value from the IP (over £80,000); 14 have had medium value (between £40- 80,000); and five have had less than £40,000.

In terms of participation, six authorities have had more than 120 participants; 16 authorities have had between 60-120 people participating in the IP; and seven authorities have had between 20-60 people participating (Chapter 6).

Some of the authorities that participated less and received less value than others have since stated they would welcome the opportunity to participate more fully in any future programme.

In terms of the formal comparison with baseline information, it is apparent that there has been significant improvement for around half of the authorities:

- for the single tier and unitary authorities there has been significant improvement recorded in CPA assessments for three authorities (North Tyneside, Northumberland County Council and South Tyneside);
- for the District Councils the only one to have received a new CPA assessment (Chester-le-Street) has moved from 'Poor' to 'Good';
- for the Fire and Rescue Services there has been no change based on the evidence from overall assessments.

Where there have been re-assessments these have been undertaken under the Audit Commission's "harder test" which implies an even greater distance travelled. It is of course not possible to attribute all the recorded improvement to the IP: however the evidence suggests that it has contributed to it.

All the local authorities record some impact: for some it is about the less tangible outcomes such as a shift in confidence, a willingness to participate in improvement issue rather than any more tangible outcomes. Examples of specific impact have included:

- the whole top team have greater confidence to lead improvement as a result of the Leading Culture Change pilot;
- the introduction of a new approach to communicating a local authority's work;
- better scrutiny and challenge by Members;
- going from 0 on the Equality Standard to level 2;
- improved internal performance management (through an EDS grant).

"Overall a hugely positive impetus for change and improvement that could not happen with Councils working in isolation."
(Internal Stakeholder)

Learning Points from the Workstreams and Processes

There have been a number of learning points from this evaluation: some relating to the specific workstreams and some that have arisen from the processes.

The evaluation of the IP workstreams highlighted the following learning points:

- The need for follow-on support and development after courses have taken place: this was highlighted in relation to NEEM where some participants were being well supported in their authority after the course and encouraged to use what they had learnt, while others were not: value is potentially lost without this follow-on support. Similarly, more could have been done to follow-up Challenge and Inspire events with such activity as action learning sets.
- The difficulty in engaging some Members with training and development is well rehearsed. As volunteers Members can find themselves constrained by other calls on their time and by many competing priorities. The IP has had some success with Member engagement by offering high quality and relevant inputs, at a range of locations and at different times of day. Members have most appreciated practical development opportunities, such as in media skills and community engagement. They also report the benefit of a learning environment with peers from other authorities in an atmosphere free from local party political rivalry. Peer pressure, or simply seeing others benefit from development, has proved an effective incentive to Member engagement.
- There has been considerable learning from the various funded projects during the IP but as few had completed by end of 2007, it is not clear whether that learning has been fully captured or shared.

The evaluation of the IP processes led to the following learning points:

- There is no publically available baseline data from auditing bodies (ie applied consistently across all authorities over time and produced at regular enough intervals) for an evaluation of this sort.
- More could be achieved with additional staffing resource in the Programme Management Team. It has been lean, and arguably greater value could have been achieved with more resource supporting the follow-on work identified above. Keeping the management costs low is important but not at the cost of what else could be delivered.
- It is important for governance bodies to be transparent and to safeguard their integrity. Allowing key providers (even where they are also part of the public sector "family") to be part of key funding decisions that will benefit their organisation has raised concerns.

- It is hard to sustain pro-active, challenging discussions in meetings with attendances of 25 people without huge time commitment: the new RIEP will face the challenge of allowing for in-depth discussion on issues while at the same time managing an efficient meeting with a large group of people involved. There is a risk of disengagement if this does not happen.
- Communication is central to effective engagement and participation in a number of different ways. Reaching all those who need to be reached can be challenging in large bureaucratic organisations and a willingness to cascade information in clear ways throughout an organisation helps the communication process. Some authorities were better than others at doing this during the IP process, resulting in more participation by their staff and Members. Many have recognised that part of the responsibility for good communication lies with themselves.
- The impact on individuals and authorities from the IP activities has been significant but there is no sense as to whether they have made significant impact on the communities the authorities serve.

Future Recommendations

The future recommendations follow on from the learning points raised above:

- a the future strategy should take into account the potential added-value of building in more follow-on support to whatever capacity-building activities it pursues;
- b the IP has supported the engagement of members in their own development well. Ways to further engage members in their own development should be explored, building on what has been learnt from the methods used by the IP to examine what attracts them;
- c future grant allocations should be more prescriptive as to the process for sharing learning from the activity;
- d there is a need to explore new ways to establish meaningful baseline data that can be re-measured at the end of the evaluation period;
- e the future programme should examine carefully how to achieve maximum value for money without cutting programme management costs so much they inhibit impact;
- f the IESG should re-visit the issue of conflict of interest;
- g the IESG should consider how it might re-invigorate its meetings with a view to allowing for greater discussion and challenge;
- h the IESG may wish to review how the new partnership communicates with all its stakeholders and at the same time explore with stakeholders what they can do to further assist in this important part of the process;



- i the next strategy should consider how to link outcomes for communities with the activities undertaken so that there is a clear causal link between the two;
- j most of the activities to date have been for local authorities and Fire and Rescue Services but clearly if LAAs are to be the central planning tool for local areas then it will be important to broaden the scope to other public sector partners.

Conclusion

The North East Improvement Partnership's approach to foster regional collaboration on improvement and capacity building has had significant impacts both on individuals and authorities. It has achieved a lot in a relatively short time, largely due to the involvement of stakeholders in its governance and to the commitment and professionalism of those helping to deliver its Programme. All 29 of the organisations involved have recorded improvement and for some this has been very significant. The IP has laid a strong foundation for future collaboration and culture change.