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Communities and Local Government

National Evaluation of the Capacity Building Programme for Local Government

Annex 4: Follow On Study of Progress in Seven Case Study Improvement Partnerships

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Executive Summary

Introduction and background

This report is one of a series of outputs from the national evaluation of the Capacity Building Programme for local government in England (CBP), being undertaken by a team of researchers at the Policy Research Institute (PRI) at Leeds Metropolitan University and the Cities Research Unit at the University of West of England. This report summarises the findings from the second phase of fieldwork with regional and sub-regional Improvement Partnerships, established to facilitate capacity building and improvement activity in local authorities. The research underpinning this report was undertaken in seven case study Improvement Partnerships (see Section 2) in October and November 2006 and follows a similar – baseline – exercise undertaken during the same period during 2005. It thus both draws on the earlier research (see Section 3) and identifies evidence of progress and impact (see Section 10) since the baseline phase.

Governance arrangements

The governance arrangements (see Section 5) established by the different Improvement Partnerships differ widely, to fit the circumstances specific to each Partnership. However, the case studies tended to have at least one board at which all the partner members are represented by their Chief Executive or other senior officer. Elected members are typically less involved, but several of the case studies were attempting to strengthen the involvement of elected members. In several of the case studies, efforts had also been made to rationalise the regional infrastructure, for instance by merging the Improvement Partnership with the Regional Centre of Excellence (e.g. West Midlands and London) or through bringing other local authority bodies together (e.g. Northeast). Central and support agencies such as the IDeA or Audit Commission usually had some form of involvement but there was no typical structure for this.

Establishing the partnerships

In establishing the partnerships (see Section 6) many of our case studies had encountered challenges and time delays. Many of the Partnerships were only just or had recently completed the establishment phase. The success of the establishment phase and the extent to which this could be completed quickly was highly dependent on the existence of pre-existing structures and partnership working experience between the partners, and, crucially, key individuals in the partner organisations. Where these were not in place, the case study partnerships had been more difficult to establish. Even where they were in place the process of establishing the Improvement Partnerships,

designing and implementing a programme of improvement and capacity building work has been characterised by building wider and deeper networks of individual relationships and trust between officers at all levels of the organisations involved. Across all the case studies, this process has been time consuming. However, given evidence from the National Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships, this is should not be seen as out of line with educated expectations. That said, the findings from the evaluation suggest that time delays can provide challenges to building and maintaining organisational commitment and in establishing future similar partnerships, thought needs to be given to generating appropriate 'quick wins' (see Section 10.5 and Section 11.2).

Capacity building themes

Capacity building themes (see Section 7) being pursued by the case study Improvement Partnerships included:

- Training and development of elected members, senior officers and middle managers (see Section 7.1 and Section 7.2).
- Partnership development between the local authority members of the Improvement Partnerships and between them and their wider public, private and voluntary sector partners in Local Strategic Partnerships (see Section 7.3).
- Organisational development diagnostic activities (see Section 7.4).
- Performance management (see Section 7.6).
- Research and knowledge transfer and shared learning (see Section 7.7).
- Recruitment and retention (see Section 7.8).
- Tailored support to individual local authorities (see Section 7.9).

Delivery mechanisms

A variety of different mechanisms (see Section 8) were used by Improvement Partnerships to deliver support to local authority partners. These included:

- **Use of CBP National Programmes**, such as those run by the IDeA (see Section 8.1).
- **External consultancy support**, such as management or training consultancies (see Section 8.2).
- **Development of new tools and specific regional or sub-regional improvement programmes**, such as training and development programmes, shared competency frameworks or pools of mentors/coaches (see Section 8.3).
- **Joint project development**, such as encouraging partnerships between sub-groups of members to develop specific improvement projects (see Section 8.4).

- **Development of shared infrastructure** to support capacity building, such as research centres, information and performance monitoring offices, joint posts and web-resources (see Section 8.5).

Challenging and supporting poor performers

Improvement Partnerships are generally mindful of the sector and region-wide benefits, as well as individual authority benefits that can arise from supporting improvements in lower performing authorities. Additionally, peer competition, a commitment to challenging poor performance through collaborative working and a culture of continuous improvement are all key drivers in improving poor performance. Feedback at this phase of the evaluation, illustrates that specific support for poor performers is variable. The case study research illustrates that activity to support poor and weak authorities falls as a central area of work within some partnerships, but is not focused upon in others, with the more recently established partnerships among our case studies being most explicitly concerned with this issue.

Impact

Attributing specific impacts in terms of specific examples of organisational change to the establishment and operation of the case study Improvement proved challenging. Where Improvement Partnerships had supported or provided training and development opportunities there was evidence that individual level impacts had occurred but in most cases insufficient time had passed to be able to identify any resulting organisational changes.

The impacts of Improvement Partnerships are, for the most part, related to improvements in 'process' and 'governance' rather than service delivery (see Section 10.1). For instance, by far the most significant impacts had been in relation to strengthening the partnership capacity of partner authorities. There was clear evidence of evidence increased incidences of partnership working between partners and also the establishment and development of personal networks and relationships between key staff both at the leadership level of the partners and in relation to key functional areas (such as corporate performance and improvement, HR, communications, consultation). There was also some tentative evidence of 'spillover' from cooperation with other forms of partnership – such as shared back office or service delivery – emerging as an indirect outcome from the work of Improvement Partnerships.

There was also some evidence of the potential of Improvement Partnerships to deliver more efficient capacity building support to local authorities and that this might lead in turn to more efficient working practices in councils (see Section 10.4). However, it was not possible at this stage to directly quantify any specific savings.

The future role of Improvement Partnerships

Discussions with fieldwork respondents and interpretation of their responses and wider evidence from the case study partnerships suggests that Improvement Partnerships might be able to fulfil a wider and more developed role in the future (see Section 11), such as:

- Delivering **more effective and a wider range of improvement support** to local authorities.
- **Facilitating stronger relationships between councils**, contributing to enhanced partnership working, for instance in relation to shared service delivery, back office functions and in two-tier areas they might be a useful vehicle for delivering more joined up working between District and County Councils.
- Facilitating a greater emphasis on **capacity building to deliver shared objectives** as expressed through outcome based targets, goals and priorities, rather than generic corporate capacity building.
- Facilitating **enhanced community leadership** and helping to build the capacity of the entire governance and public service delivery system at a local and regional level, including potentially offering capacity building support to partners other than local authorities.
- **Monitoring and challenging poor performance** and **supporting improvement** as part of a greater emphasis on self-regulation in performance management.
- Acting as a **channel for communication between local and central government.**

However, to fulfil these enhanced roles, Improvement Partnerships will need to be considerably more developed than at present and in many cases will require additional capacity. Most of the case study partnerships were at an early stage of development and it will be necessary to carefully manage any increase in the roles and responsibilities placed on Improvement Partnerships (see Section 11.6).

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

This report is one of a series of outputs from the national evaluation of the Capacity Building Programme for local government in England (CBP), being undertaken by a team of researchers at the Policy Research Institute (PRI) at Leeds Metropolitan University and the Cities Research Unit at the University of West of England. This report summarises the findings from the second phase of fieldwork with regional and sub-regional Improvement Partnerships, established to facilitate capacity building and improvement activity in local authorities. The research underpinning this report was undertaken in seven case study Improvement Partnerships in October and November 2006 and follows a similar – baseline – exercise undertaken during the same period during 2005. It thus both draws on the earlier research and identifies evidence of progress and impact since the baseline phase.

1.2 The Capacity Building Programme for Local Government

The CBP was launched in 2003 as a joint Communities and Local Government/Local Government Association (LGA) initiative to support capacity building and improvement activities within local authorities in England. The CBP has supported four main streams of improvement and capacity building activity in local authorities:

- **Pilot Projects**: the CBP supported a large number of pilot projects which were to "trial innovative ways of working and 'pave the way' for other authorities".
- **National Programmes**: the CBP initially focused on the establishment or expansion of several National Programmes, delivered by central bodies (such as the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), Employers Organisation for Local Government (EO), the 4Ps and framework contractors), delivering training and other organisational development support to local authorities.
- **Improvement Partnerships**: Since 2004, the CBP has also channelled financial resources through 'Improvement Partnerships'; groups of local authorities (including Fire and Rescue Authorities and National Parks Authorities) established on a regional, sub-regional or County-wide basis to undertake collective improvement activity.
- **Direct Support**: the CBP has also provided Direct Support to authorities defined as either 'poor' or 'weak' through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process.

1.3 The national evaluation

The evaluation of the Capacity Building Programme has been underway since late 2004. A scoping phase was conducted until May 2005, including a short evaluation of the Pilot Programmes. The main phase of the evaluation commenced in September 2005 and has four main components:

- **Improvement Partnerships** – Qualitative research, including interviews, focus groups and a documentary review are being undertaken in seven case study Improvement Partnerships. The fieldwork was carried out in two tranches. The first, baseline stage, was undertaken between September 2005 and December 2005. A report summarising the results of this was completed in January 2006. The second phase of the Improvement Partnership fieldwork took place in the autumn 2006. The aim is to compare progress over-time in each of the case studies, to produce evidence of what approaches are currently being deployed in the Partnerships and which are having positive benefits, and why. This report represents a summary of the findings from the second phase of fieldwork and more detailed methodological information is provided in Section 2.
- **National Programmes** – Qualitative research (again including interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis) in eighteen case study local authorities. The research focuses on a series of different levels within the case study authorities. Sixteen of the case studies were chosen for maximum participation in the National Programmes. In these, the emphasis is on the impact of participation on the individuals concerned and the translation of this to organisational change, including what facilitated and blocked this transition. A further two case studies have been chosen for non-participation in the National Programmes, to assess the reasons for not participating and the alternative types of improvement and capacity building activity that might be underway. Case study work in local authorities is supplemented by consultation with the National Programme Providers and examination of the evaluative and management information collected by them. This work is currently underway and was completed in October 2006.
- **Direct Support** – A number of research activities consider the role and impact of Direct Support on local authorities. A report on emerging findings from this work was completed in September 2006.
- **Stakeholder Consultation** – A number of qualitative interviews with stakeholders are planned. This work is to assess the impact of the CBP at a sectoral level, following the multi-levelled analytical model developed in the scoping phase of the research.

This report summarises the findings to have emerged from the evaluation of the seven participating case study Regional Improvement Partnerships.

2 Methods

Evaluation research was undertaken in seven case study Improvement Partnerships, over two phases of fieldwork. The first fieldwork phase took place between September and November 2005 and was intended to establish a baseline, in addition to capturing 'lessons learned' from the process of establishing the partnerships. The second phase of the fieldwork took place a year later (between September and November 2006), and was intended to inform judgements about the progress made by the partnerships as well as any evidence of early impacts.

Together, the two phases of the fieldwork were intended to answer the following key research questions:

- What is the range of activities being undertaken by the improvement partnerships?
- How does the Improvement Partnership approach add value to capacity building activities?
- How does the Improvement Partnership approach generate cost and resource savings which can be reinvested in frontline delivery and can these be quantified?
- How does the Improvement partnership approach generate increased quality of local government in terms of leadership, service delivery and responding to local needs?
- What are the key barriers and opportunities to the success of the Improvement Partnership approach?

Fieldwork was undertaken in the following seven Improvement Partnerships:

- The Devon Improvement Programme (DIP).
- The Leicestershire and Rutland Improvement Partnership (LRIP).
- The West Midlands Improvement Partnership (WMIP).
- The North West Improvement Network (NWIN).
- The Improvement Partnership for Northeast Local Government (IPNELG).
- The London Regional Improvement Partnership (Capital Ambition).
- The Kent-Swindon Local Government Financing Model.

The fieldwork research consisted of the following evidence collection processes:

- Analysis of a range of documents made available by the Improvement Partnerships often including the initial bid to the CBP, delivery and project plans and strategies.

- Semi-structured interviews with all relevant stakeholders, identified through negotiations with central points of contact in each of the Improvement Partnerships. These frequently included representatives of partner authorities, representatives of the Communities and Local Government, Audit Commission and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA).
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with individuals involved in the governance arrangements (Programme/Partnership Boards and Steering Groups).
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with central staff appointed to project manage the work of the Partnerships.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with representatives of partner authorities.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with beneficiaries of training, development or other activities funded or provided by the Partnerships.

All interviews were conducted against a topic guide agreed with the relevant research and policy teams at Communities and Local Government (Appendix 1). Interviews were recorded and detailed interview notes were used as the basis for the production of separate case study summaries. Throughout, steps have been taken to protect the anonymity of individual respondents.

3 Baseline Findings

3.1 The Partnerships

The baseline stage of the research (see Appendix 2) was undertaken at a time when many of the Improvement Partnerships were still in the establishment phase. Even during the baseline stage of the research there was some evidence of frustration among some fieldwork respondents about the time taken to establish the partnerships and governance structures. A range of common issues were identified as explanations for apparently slow progress in the establishment of the partnerships. These included large distances between partners, poor transport and communications links which prevent or hamper regular face-to-face meetings, conflicting political control in different partner organisations, tensions between County and District tiers and vastly different starting points (e.g. different CPA ratings) among partners. Releasing sufficient (and sufficiently senior) staff time was also problematic in some partner organisations and acted as a barrier to achieving organisational commitment to the development of the Improvement Partnership, slowing progress. Despite the genuine and understandable concerns of some respondents, the time taken at that stage to establish the partnerships was not out of line with expectations given recent experience of the time taken and difficulties encountered in establishing partnerships, especially between political organisations like local authorities. The research also found that Improvement Partnerships were easier to form where existing partnerships or networks were already in place.

No typical set of governance structures was in operation across the case study Improvement Partnerships, though most had established some form of Partnership or Programme Board which made strategic decisions, with members largely formed of Chief Executives and other senior officers from partner authorities and regional bodies. Elected members were less frequently represented and where they were represented they tended to be less active. Underneath such governance structures, some Partnerships had established Steering Groups and nearly all had some central administrative and management staff who were responsible for the management and delivery of the Partnership's activities on a day to day basis.

3.2 Delivery of improvement and capacity building support

The Improvement Partnerships had pursued two main ways of delivering improvement and capacity building support. The first of these involved the development of a detailed central programme of improvement and capacity building activities to be delivered to all partners. The second was more flexible and involved local authorities approaching the Partnership for support, largely in the form of financial allocations to undertake some

specific improvement activities. In some case studies, a combination of these approaches had been adopted.

While the case study partnerships had adopted different specific activities to support the differing needs of their partner authorities, some common themes did emerge, including:

- Training and development of elected members.
- Training and development of officers, mainly senior and middle managers.
- Support for partnership development.
- Organisational development diagnostic activities.
- Development of internal management systems and processes.
- Improvement of communications and consultation activities.

Improvement Partnerships had addressed these issues through a variety of mechanisms, including through

- Use of existing Capacity Building Programme national programmes.
- Buying in of external consultancy support.
- The development of new tools and programmes.
- Joint project development.
- Establishing local/regional infrastructure.

3.3 Support to Poor Performers

At the time of undertaking the baseline research the transition of responsibility for supporting poor performers was emerging as a policy priority in the central – local government relationship. While it was commonly understood within the sector that future changes would involve the sector taking more responsibility for the performance of local authorities, the results of CPA 2005 had not yet been published, and the scope and details of future changes (e.g. IDeA, 2006; DCLG, 2006) were not yet known. It is thus important not to judge the findings from the baseline research with the benefit of hindsight. While the baseline research suggested that there was no common approach to working with poor performers, the research did suggest that there were a number of barriers to Partnerships taking responsibility for this. Collectively these meant that the delivery of support to poor performers was, at the baseline stage, relatively undeveloped in the work and work plans of the case study Improvement Partnerships.

3.4 Early Impacts

For the most part, the case study partnerships were only at an early stage in their development and unable to offer detailed evidence of impact. However, some evidence of early and nascent impacts was apparent, including:

- A widely reported increase in the depth and scope of partnership working as a result of engagement with the Improvement Partnership.

- In some longer running partnerships, recognition that changes were beginning in the organisational culture of some partners.
- Stimulating shared learning.
- Scope and potential to generate efficiency savings now and in the future.

3.5 Benefits and Challenges

The benefits and challenges posed by Improvement Partnerships in the baseline research are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Benefits and Challenges in the Improvement Partnership Approach, evidence from the baseline research

Benefits	Challenges
Potential economies of scale and efficiencies from joint project delivery.	Long distances and / or poor communications links between partners.
Shared learning.	Conflicting political control between partners.
'Spillovers' from cooperation, leading to enhanced joint working in other areas.	Tensions in two-tier relationships.
Strategic alignment, especially in two-tier areas and between neighbouring authorities.	Maintaining the commitment of partner organisations at all levels.
Peer pressure in support of improvement.	Releasing staff time and ensuring that the 'right' staff are released.
Potential to secure external support at the same time as retaining capacity within the sector.	Different starting points and needs for capacity building activity.

3.6 Future Potential of the Improvement Partnership Approach

The baseline research suggested that Improvement Partnerships had the potential to be an effective mechanism for the delivery of capacity building support to local authorities, including strengthening the working relationship between central government and local authorities. It suggested that realising this potential would require that central government broadened the number of funding and capacity building streams that were channelled through Improvement Partnerships. The research found that Improvement Partnerships were suited to the types of challenge that authorities were likely to face in the future, especially those that have been subsequently posed by the local government White Paper (DCLG, 2006), such as enhanced responsibility for local community leadership, outcome based delivery and self-regulation in relation to performance. However, evidence from the baseline stage also suggested the need for caution in transferring additional responsibilities to Improvement Partnerships, as a result of their early stage of development.

4 Context

4.1 National Policy Context

The policy framework within which Improvement Partnerships operate has developed considerably over the last year. The emerging policy framework is summarised in the October White Paper on the future role of local government (DCLG, 2006), which identifies a number of changes in the policy framework in relation to Improvement Partnerships. These include capacity building to meet new challenges (such as increasing the role of the public and local communities in the planning and delivery of local public services), and changing governance structures and improving the quality of local elected leadership. Both these changes are likely to lead to significant capacity building challenges for local authorities as they restructure their planning, delivery and performance management procedures so that they can respond to public demands (N.B. evidence from the last change in elected leadership structures suggests that this presented local authorities with capacity building challenges that are still being addressed today). The White Paper also heralds changes in the nature of local authorities in two-tier areas, including not only re-organisation in some areas, but a wider movement to "improved two-tier models".

Perhaps the most significant change is the suggestion that local authorities should universally take up the challenge issued by the first phase of the Lyons Review (Lyons Inquiry, 2006) to act as 'Place Shapers'. This requires local authorities to take an enhanced role in the strategic leadership and coordination of the wide range of local actors (in the public, private and voluntary sectors) which impact on the nature of 'place' at a local level. Again, this policy agenda is likely to lead to significant challenges to local authorities.

4.2 Changing capacity building needs in the sector?

The baseline research identified capacity building needs as determined by influences related to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). These tended to be authority specific and related to corporate capacity, generic internal organisational functions such as performance and project management and strategic planning. Capacity building needs in relation to these functions tended to be around skills needs for specific groups of staff, particularly at leadership and middle management levels. This research suggested that some of these continued to be important, particularly around recruitment and retention in specific professional and occupational areas, such as planning. The baseline research also identified challenges associated with the need to realise efficiency savings. These challenges continued to be relevant as authorities continue to attempt to reorient their organization to tackle national policy objectives while realising annual efficiency gains.

Other workstreams in the evaluation of the Capacity Building Programme have also frequently highlighted the capacity building demands created by turnover of councillors at elections, particularly where there are a large number of new councillors or where the council changes political control. Such changes are doubly challenging where changing political control results in changes to senior officers, including Chief Executives. Similar capacity building challenges were reported as having arisen in some case study partnerships as a result of local government elections in May 2005 and other respondents were concerned about the future implications of council elections in this regard. This was a particular problem in London where there had been widespread changes as a result of elections in May. Despite the intervention of the Leadership Centre for Local Government in the Capital, there have been changes in Chief Executive in a significant number of councils since the elections.

These challenges can be seen as having arisen from the changes in role and organisation of local authorities that emerged from the 2001 local government White Paper (DETR, 2001), which highlighted capacity needs in areas such as performance and project management, generic management skills, strengthened overview and scrutiny and increased work in partnerships through Local Strategic Partnerships. By contrast, this follow-on research with local authorities and Improvement Partnerships identified a new and emerging series of capacity building needs, largely related to the demands posed by the 2006 White Paper which was published while the fieldwork was being completed. While the date of the publication of the White Paper may have itself influenced the responses received, many respondents also reported that they had been moving toward this assessment of local capacity building needs as a result of the long period of trailing the likely content of the White Paper over the last year.

The types of capacity building agenda emerging from this includes:

- The need to build greater partnership capacity. This refers both to the increased need for joint working between the different local authorities (including between District and County authorities in two-tier areas) and other partners in the statutory, private and voluntary/community sectors in response to the increased emphasis on local authorities as community leaders.
- The need to develop shared objectives, expressed in outcome terms, and to build capacity to deliver these (e.g. the future development and delivery of Local Area Agreements and Multi-Area Agreements).
- The need to deliver efficiency gains through joint project development, 'back office' functions and shared service delivery.
- The need for local authorities to take an enhanced role in community leadership, coordinating the wider strategic efforts of a range of public, private and voluntary sector partners.
- The need for local authorities to devolve some aspects of decision making and management of service delivery to the local area and neighbourhood levels.

- The need to coordinate activities and build relationships between local authorities and regional or sub-regional structures such as City Regions, Regional Development Agencies and Regional Assemblies (including, in London, the Mayor).
- The need for Improvement Partnerships to be part of the wider effort to take responsibility for the performance of local authorities in the context of a more strategic approach to central government regulation and a new performance management system for the sector.

In addition, the extension of CPA to Fire and Rescue Services was identified in one region as driving demand for capacity building for the Improvement Partnership in the near future. Fire and Rescue Services were also identified by respondents in this region as potentially facing large scale staff turnover at senior levels as a product of the ageing profile of staff, especially at senior levels.

In some cases, the transition from capacity building needs associated with the 2001 White Paper to those associated with the 2006 White Paper were about more than simply responding to the policy demands of central government. In most Partnerships, this transition was at least partly the product of the impact of improvement activities that had already taken place, through the Improvement Partnerships, through the wider Capacity Building Programme and through authorities' own investment and improvement programmes. One Partnership where Improvement Partnership activity had been particularly important in changing the context for capacity building demands was the partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council. The latter was now clearly a more capable and more demanding 'client' as a result of receiving support through the partnership.

More generally though, the emphasis was shifting from one of capacity building in relation to the generic corporate competence of local authorities toward building more specific forms of organisational capacity linked to the pursuit of specific outcome based priorities. While this trend was certainly present, it was emergent rather than embedded and was not yet complete. This suggests that it is in relation to achieving outcome-based objectives that capacity building may now be needed and it is thus in these areas that future capacity building support from central government, through Improvement Partnerships, will need to be focused.

5 Governance arrangements

5.1 Structures

No common set of governance structures have been put in place across the Improvement Partnerships. Governance arrangements have been established which best 'fit' within existing strategic structures in the area. It has been common practice for partnerships to draw on these existing structures in setting up the Improvement Partnerships. In Devon, for example, the partnership drew on established partnership structures in the County such as the Devon Chief Executives Group and the Devon Improvement Group.

Improvement Partnerships have used creative approaches to overcome challenges faced in putting in place an appropriate governance structure. For example, the North West has established a 'twin' board and three Advisory panels: a Strategic board to make strategic decisions and to approve the wider remit of NWIN, with an Executive board (assisted by advisory members including the IDeA, the Regional Centre of Excellence, RENEW Northwest, North West Regional Employers Organisation and the University of Manchester) to directly influence the development and scope of NWIN as a membership organisation. The three Advisory panels were established around the key identified themes in the Improvement Partnership (these being Knowledge Creation and Dissemination, Learning Programmes and Organisational Development through Learning).

In London, the Improvement Partnership board is managed by a partnership of stakeholders. In addition to London Councils, the region's 33 local authorities are represented by the Chair and Deputy Chair (Chief Executives of Kensington & Chelsea and Enfield respectively), and by five other Chief Executive representatives from Hammersmith & Fulham, Merton, City of Westminster, Lewisham and Greenwich. The Board includes representation from the Government Office for London, whose representative is the Regional Director of Practice. Organisations such as London Connects, the Greater London Authority (GLA), London Fire & Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), IDeA and the Local Government Leadership Centre are also part of the board.

In Devon, there is a four tier management structure, made up of:

- **The Programme Board** – which sets strategic direction and is responsible for the governance of DIP. Representatives of all partners are members of the programme board, normally at Chief Executive or Leader level.
- **The Steering Group** – which is responsible for steering the programme, implementation of the projects and monitoring of progress against the output and milestone measures. It is also responsible for spending decisions up to £50,000. It is made up of six partner Chief Executives who each represent two or three partners plus the Programme team.

- **Project teams** – each of the six projects has a specified project team responsible for implementing them. A project lead is also defined, with each of these being an officer from the partner organisations.
- **The DIP Programme Team** – including a Manager and Coordinator.

In the Northeast, the Improvement Partnership structure has been developed to be complementary to the structures already in existence in the Association of Northeast Councils (ANEC). Local authorities and FRSs are represented at Chief Officer level on the IPNELG Board, which meets to maintain a strategic overview of the regional programme and action plan, elements of which are managed by steering groups and dedicated programme staff (who are employed by ANEC). Recent changes to the governance arrangements (described below) will strengthen this relationship, and build in provision for greater involvement of elected members in scrutinising IPNELG's work.

In the West Midlands region, until 2005 there were three separate improvement partnerships. The Centre of Excellence, SMART (which was bringing in funds for the development of e-government, although it was not as robust in terms of ownership) and the improvement partnership. When the improvement partnership developed its bid for devolved funding, it needed a robust governance arrangement as the board of the partnership needed to be seen to be involving and representing local authorities and especially Chief Executives. The partnership looked at other regions and shared ideas regarding governance. The authorities and the chief executives were comfortable with the Centre of Excellence arrangements. Therefore the decision was made to adopt the governance arrangements of the Centre of Excellence - i.e. that its board should become the senior decision making body for the regional improvement partnership. The agencies also invited a number of chief executives onto the board to fully reflect the region. The regional agencies, which have been meeting for the last two years will provide the strategic co-ordinating group.

5.2 Recent Changes

Most areas report a shift in emphasis during the last year within the IP from 'planning' to 'delivery'. For example, in the Northeast region, IPNELG spent much of their first year devising a detailed action plan, through a series of workshops and joint planning sessions involving people from all the region's local authorities and FRSs. They are now engaged in commissioning the delivery of different elements of this programme from a range of providers.

There had been some changes in governance within Improvement Partnership over the last year, in some areas these were more significant than in others. Indeed, in the Northeast the most significant reported change in the operation of the partnership over the past twelve months was in relation to its governance. In the Northeast governance arrangements between the IPNELG, the Northeast Centre of Excellence and Northeast Connects have been merged and a number of additional changes have occurred, including:

- Organised under the auspices of the Association of Northeast Councils (ANEC), there is now one **Joint Partnership Board** with responsibility for steering and reviewing progress of all three initiatives (IPNELG, NECEx and NE Connects). Chaired by a local authority Chief Executive, membership of the Board is comprised of senior representatives of all 25 local authorities in the Northeast, one senior manager representing the region's four Fire & Rescue Services, and representatives from a range of support agencies, including IDeA, NEREO, GONE, ONE Northeast and the Audit Commission. The work programme of each initiative is overseen by a Working Group, membership of which is drawn from the Board and includes other appropriate partners. This structure allows for the separation of strategic and operational decisions, as well as ensuring that opportunities for collaboration between initiatives are pursued.
- A **Member Review Group** has been established (as a sub group of ANEC), to provide political accountability for the work of the three initiatives. This provides members with the means to influence the strategic direction of the three initiatives and the opportunity to scrutinise delivery of the three programmes.

In the partnership between Swindon Borough Council and Kent County Council, two significant changes were identified as having affected the partnership over the past year - the departure of the interim Director of Social Services seconded from Kent County Council to Swindon Borough Council and the national restructure of Social Services with Children's Services.

In the West Midlands, the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (WMRIEP) initially spent time ensuring that the partnership was well established and that the governance structures provided a strong base from which to work. Now it sees itself concentrating on getting to grips with what it actually means to work jointly with the Centre of Excellence, shifting into the delivery phase and seeking additional projects, and seeking to minimise the risk of failing authorities. One key area of change is around extending the range of capacity building to include LSPs. This will increase capacity to deliver against Local Area Agreements. WMRIEP has gone through a formal process to get approval for this development from the Board and to ensure that all stakeholders know that it is happening.

6 Establishing the partnership

6.1 Facilitators/Enablers

In the East Midlands, the CPA was identified as the key driver in the partnership applying to the capacity building programme fund with their IP proposal consequently being developed around and emphasis on, peer support, middle manager development, recruitment and retention, performance management, leadership and change management. In Devon, the main trigger for the formation of the Improvement Partnership was a series of common weaknesses and issues raised by district CPA. These were discussed through a number of existing and operational partnership structures, principally the Devon Improvement Group (DIG) and the Devon Chief Executives Forum. The DIG in particular was cited as a major factor in enabling the bid to the CBP to be developed, with existing bonds of trust and familiarity between the members of the DIG of clear importance.

In terms of establishing the partnership, the importance of existing partnerships and structures is clear. A number of the Improvement Partnerships were based loosely around existing partnerships or are developments of them which meant that the Improvement Partnerships were much easier to form. This echoes evidence from the National Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships which suggests that success in establishing partnerships

> *"is initially conditioned by the history of past partnership working and the character and capacities of key partners, bringing 'to the table' a set of vested interests, knowledge, aspirations, hopes and fears." (Geddes, 2006).*

Such structures facilitate partnership working for a number of reasons. First, personal networks, contacts, bonds of trust and understanding between individuals and thus between organisations were already in place. Second, the actual organisational infrastructure was established, meaning that existing meeting schedules could be used to discuss the potential for the bid or, later, to develop it. Third, there was some degree of shared understanding of what the collective needs for improvement and capacity building were, meaning that a further element of preparation was already in place. While these may appear to be relatively insignificant, their existence meant that a considerable amount of 'groundwork', that would have been carried out was already in place.

One year on, in the North West strategic, governance and operational structures are now established. It is clear that establishing these structures (the process of establishing partnerships), as it appears across the board of Improvement Partnership case studies, has taken time.

6.2 Challenges/Barriers

There were some challenges in developing proposals to central government. Though support was offered by Regional Directors of Practice, Government Offices and the IDeA, there was a reported lack of clarity about the process of submitting the bid, how it would be assessed, and the criteria for awarding funding.

The long 'lead in' time to the improvement Partnership was clearly an issue. The baseline stage of the evaluation identified this, and interviewees often reflected on this 'in hindsight' during the follow-on stage of the evaluation. This was quite common in a number of areas. For example, in Devon the time taken to secure funding from central government, and subsequently in the process of project and programme planning had led to criticism of DIP, with some authorities having invested in their own improvement in the interim period, meaning that there was less alignment between authorities' needs and programme delivery than might have otherwise have been the case. While others recognised benefits in thorough planning, it was widely thought that the time taken to move from the bidding to delivery stage had led to a loss of momentum and had damaged trust and commitment to the partnership and programme delivery.

It was interesting that in the second year of the evaluation, staff from both Swindon Borough Council and Kent County Council identified a number of issues concerning the initial establishment of the partnership. These issues were felt to be more obvious than last year, possibly because of the appointment last year of the senior manager from Kent County Council to the role of Director of Social Services in Swindon Borough Council.

In the East Midlands, there was felt to be a 'time lag' relating to the amount of money the LRIP had and therefore how much they could spend. Thus, the process of setting up the partnership was reported to have been hindered by a very slow process of having the money approved. It took about four or five months and *'not a lot happened during that period'*. The Partnership got less money, so then they reconsider priority actions.

In the West Midlands it was pointed out that although they had faced no specific barriers regarding central government, it was sometimes difficult to get local authorities to work together. This was not necessarily owing to unwillingness, but rather to the fact that 'it takes capacity to build capacity' (local government officer). This is especially true of smaller authorities, where officers tended to be fully engaged in service delivery.

7 Themes in Improvement and Capacity Building Support

The types of improvement and capacity building support provided by each of the Improvement Partnerships is varied, but there are a number of common features which mean that it is possible to typologies support. These are described below.

7.1 Training and development of elected members

The majority of Improvement Partnerships have used CBP funding to design or adopt training programmes to support and enhance local leadership and member capacity. In the DIP and LRIP competency frameworks have been developed for elected members and needs assessments have been carried out to identify skills gaps. Individual councillors have completed individual learning plans and training is being provided through a number of channels. The LRIP will shortly be rolling out its member development programme which is based on the local government needs identified by each of the member authorities. It has recently advertised in the Municipal Journal for providers to deliver this work. In Devon, a range of modules is being delivered by the IDeA through the local leadership academy and details of other events for members as well as a range of e-learning modules are made available to members through the Devon Learning and Improvement Portal (LIP). A number of Improvement Partnerships have also implemented induction programmes for newly elected members.

In London, developing a member training programme is also a key strand of work. In early 2006 it was recognised that the forthcoming May elections would not only see large numbers of newly elected councillors, but would also bring forward new London leaders and new cabinet members responsible for a collective regional budget. In recognition of this, cross-borough scrutiny events have been held under the Improved Scrutiny Improvement Programme. These have focused on shared learning in areas like Health Impact Assessment and external scrutiny reviews. London Councils also now have a dedicated Member Development Manager, and a planned programme of work is being developed in partnership with IDeA, LIDN and the Leadership Centre for Local Government. The DIP is also looking to appoint a dedicated Member Development Officer

In the North West, the NWIN partnership is working in the areas of political governance and community leadership. Key issues include building strategic management skills and developing overview and scrutiny capabilities as well as addressing the challenges in recruiting and retaining a diverse and skilled set of elected members and developing the relationship between councils and other more local neighbourhood forms of engagement and

representation. From November 2006 NWIN has also initiated a scheme to award Student Bursaries. These are available to individual elected members as well as employees from any of 46 North West local authorities, employees from the five North West Fire & Rescue Services and employees from the LDNPA. The Bursaries are designed to support individuals undertaking a range of activities including academic study, research projects, community based initiatives or national or international study visits.

7.2 Training and development of senior staff and middle managers

In the partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council the aim of the partnership has been to bring about whole of service improvement. Much of this work has been focused around the delivery of support and mentoring to middle and senior managers. This has included Swindon Borough Council staff visiting Kent County Council and having one-to-ones with Kent County Council staff as well as working closely together on a day-to-day basis.

In Devon, the DIP has commissioned a number of officer development programmes from a pool of providers. During the early development of DIP, an agreement was reached between the partners about the desirability of establishing a pool of approved suppliers of training, organizational development and consultancy. Seven providers were selected to be part of the DIP provider's pool. Courses that have been run include the Experienced Manager Development Programme and the Inspiration Leading to Excellence Programme run by Gatenby Sanderson as well as IDeA Learning Pool Programmes – available to DIP partners through the Learning and Improvement Portal. In addition, each authority has been able to send one senior manager to the IDeA's Advanced Leadership Academy and access the IDeA e-learning modules through the LIP.

The LRIP has set a target to provide management training and events to assist the development of 100 middle managers. Work has been undertaken to identify their development needs and the partnership has agreed a number of management competencies. The Improvement Partnership is in the process of procuring suppliers of the management training and is also looking to incorporate management competencies into future job descriptions. In the IPNELG work is also focusing on the needs of 3rd and 4th tier officers, specifically to provide for succession planning. Research has been commissioned in each authority to identify the 'essential components' of a development programme for these officers. The partnership is also buying-in 20 places on the IDeA Leadership Academy.

Capital Ambition, through its Regional Development Programme is developing a service to provide signposting to training and development providers and is also researching the viability of a manager competency framework linked to recruitment needs which can be used across all City of

London authorities. It is also committed to using peer support and review in the training and development of staff.

7.3 Partnership Development

The very nature of Improvement Partnerships has meant that partnership working has been a key feature in all the case studies. Partnership working, a greater commitment to collaboration, and the sharing of expertise and good practice all explicitly or implicitly feature in the work streams of the partnerships. The support and facilitation of working in partnership takes on a number of guises including the organisation of events, the setting of strategic priorities and the establishment of networks and 'centres of excellence'. Partnership working is also taking place at regional and sub-regional level within the IP structures.

In London, all authorities have been asked to adopt Capital Ambition's Mutuality Statement. This commitment is designed to promote authorities' awareness of common work areas and to support partnership working. Capital Ambition's is also setting up a Performance Office which will act as a repository of existing information on authorities and provide a web-accessible data source for partners and the general public of London. The ACE/Policy Officers network, established before CBP funding, is now attended by officers representing 25 individual authorities. Membership of the network has more than doubled since the establishment of the CBP.

In the NWIN, the establishment of the Centre for Local Governance is central to the delivery of the partnership. It is hoped that the centre, delivered in partnership with the University of Manchester, will become a new resource base for local government in the North West, providing facilities for teaching, research and consultancy. The centre will also develop and coordinate regional frameworks, activities, networks and clusters. In addition, NWIN has also invested in the development of sub-regional partnerships, building upon existing forums such as the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) and setting up the Achieving Excellence in Cumbria Partnership. All of the sub-regions have appointed project managers to assist in the delivery of their programmes.

In the LRIP, the partnership has provided the opportunity for the seven chief executives of the local authorities to work closely together in a way which has not previously been possible. Similarly in SBC/KCC the governance arrangements of the partnership facilitate regular meetings between both authorities to discuss strategic and operational issues.

In Devon joint working between authorities is taking place across a range of areas including performance and project management, strategic planning and learning and development. The partnership work stream has resulted in two key outputs. The first was an event held in March 2006. The second is the development of two Partnership Toolkits. Both toolkits are available to authorities through the Devon LIP.

In the West Midlands, as the number of poor and weak authorities which are in receipt of direct support has declined, so more authorities are working together in partnership. This includes some which historically have not had a strong record of partnership working. In addition, by appointing officers to work specifically with the CBF, RIEP has been able to develop partnership working and encourage bids around the areas which were set as regional priorities but where relatively little was happening. The twelve agreed regional priorities are publicised using regional networks, for example those for performance and scrutiny. This often leads to specific development sessions - this is important as it 'makes space for local authority officers to think outside the day job' which can provide the basis for partnership working around specific issues. In addition to publicising priorities through networks and events, WMRIEP staff also visit individual local authorities as officers are not always aware of all the existing networks which they could tap into.

7.4 Organisational development diagnostic activities

Many of the Improvement Partnerships have undertaken diagnostic work to assist with organisational development, sometimes with the support of external consultants. In the IPNELG the partnership has adopted a commissioning approach to the allocation of CBP funding. This has made it possible for the partnership to put out invitations to tender for suppliers to deliver specific pieces of work, many of which are designed to support organisational development. The partnership has also commissioned external consultants to undertake an evaluation of the partnership programme to assist them in becoming sustainable after the CBP funding has been exhausted. In Devon the DIP commissioned the IDeA and the Audit Commission to carry out a small amount of consultancy work on performance management in each of the local authorities. Capital Ambition also commissioned external consultants to identify, collect and analyse key sources of performance data.

The partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council has dedicated large proportions of its resource to diagnostic activity in order to define and refine individual areas of activity within each of the work streams. Diagnostic activity has included file audits and financial reviews. In the North West nearly all authorities have submitted individual learning plans which identify the specific needs of each authority. These have been aggregated to produce regional and sub-regional learning plans.

7.5 Developing communication and consultation capacities

Communicating the work of the partnerships is being recognised by Improvement Partnerships as an important area of work. Most have now developed websites and produce newsletters and information for both internal and external audiences. The DIP has detailed information about its

work on its learning and improvement portal which is available to both partners and the general public, and both NWIN and the IPNELG have dedicated external facing websites. DIP has also purchased a consultation software package and a programme of training for both consultation and communication officers.

The LRIP has this year added a communication strand to the work of the partnership to encourage and deliver effective and regular communication within the partnership and throughout the region. Information will be disseminated via the LRIP newsletter, a dedicated website, an intranet site and formal media and public sector briefings. The LRIP also plans to host a national conference to draw together and disseminate shared learning at the end of the current partnership programme. Capital Ambition has also allocated a proportion of its budget to developing a communications strategy to publicise the programme and share its aims with key stakeholders such as partner organisations, regulators, elected members, local MPs and key local government personnel in HR and corporate services. In February it launched its own website which details information about its partners, projects and forthcoming events.

7.6 Performance management

Performance management is a key theme within the work of Improvement Partnerships and some innovative work is taking place in this area. For instance, Capital Ambition is in the planning stages of setting up a Performance Office. It is envisaged that this Office will collate, monitor and analyse regional performance data which can then be used to identify where service improvement is needed. It will also act as a central storage point for information from all authorities. A longer-term aim of the Performance Office is to provide a web-accessible data source for partners and the general public which will provide up-to-date and tailored information on London Services. In the LRIP authorities have procured a performance management system – TENS – and carried out joint training with officers and members using PRINCE 2 methodology. They have also developed a performance management toolkit and a 'Skills Portal' to enable authorities to build up a skills profile for any worker. This means that a profile of the area's public sector skills base can be mapped. From this, skills gaps can be identified and then plugged. LRIP have also employed a project manager to undertake some of the work in this work strand.

In Devon the performance management project has consisted of a small amount of consultancy work from the Audit Commission and IDeA on performance management and now, under new leadership, the project is being reoriented around an outcome based strategic vision for the County. A county-wide conference on performance management was held in November 2006 to disseminate this aim and funding has been agreed to support two temporary posts to develop an 'evidence base for Devon' to support the revision of the County's Community Strategy and the development of a self-regulatory framework for the County. In the Northeast

work is taking place to embed a performance management culture within partner organisations. In the North West the Centre for Local Governance has performance management as one of areas of work. It hopes to link public value creation strategies and development to performance regimes and public value consortium projects being developed by the Centre for Public Policy Management (CPPM).

7.7 Research and knowledge transfer

Research and knowledge transfer are key work areas for many of the IP's. Several are setting up distinct Centres to co-ordinate and house research, learning and dissemination activities. In the North West this work is being carried out by the Centre for Local Governance (CfLG) which is run in partnership with the University of Manchester. The centre involves three University schools - Education, Business, and the Institute for Political and Economic Governance - and is supported by a 'knowledge hub' based at the Centre for Educational Leadership (CEL). The CfLG has started to build a greater shared understanding of knowledge creation and transfer through the data collected for the Regional Learning Plan and will primarily use design experiments methods to explore more complex "wicked issues", in addition to conducting statistical analysis around sustainable communities to work out why particular communities in the North West do well economically and socially. In London, Capital Ambition is in the process of setting up the Centre for Local Governance Research & Development in Public Sector Reform. The concept is based on the developments in the North West region and it is proposed that the Centre will be comprised of a mixture of practitioners and policy-oriented academics and will be based at the University of East London. The Centre will support two of Capital Ambition's goals around considering the future of public services in London and developing future public sector leaders in the region.

In Devon the Learning and Improvement Portal is a key outcome of the DIP. It is a website which hosts information, including project management documents, about the DIP projects as well as learning and development information and online course material for officers and members in partner authorities. It is also a means of accessing outputs from the DIP such as the Partnership toolkit and supporting questionnaires and self-assessments. A separate section contains articles on improvement themes such as coaching, organizational change and service improvement models. It was also a primary means of communicating about the progress of the DIP. The LIP has more than 430 registered users across the County and receives between 150-200 visitors each month.

In the LRIP the Learning strand is in the early stages of development but they have now started to take what they feel is a 'proactive' approach to shared learning – for example, they have visited Staffordshire Plus IP. They are in discussions with Staffordshire Plus and LGEM about doing a joint learning event in the spring of next year.

7.8 Recruitment and retention

Improving the recruitment and retention of staff has been a key focus of the work in the HR work stream of the partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council. Work has largely focused on social worker and care manager recruitment, with creation of a new social worker career grade, the increased marketing of Swindon Borough Council as an employer and the implementation of the Investors in People standard. In London, although in their early stages the 'Make a difference project' and the 'New routes to work' project are looking at improving the skills and flexibility of the workforce.

7.9 Improving individual authorities' performance

In a number of the IP's funding has been allocated to provide tailored support for individual authorities. In the Northeast local authorities and FRSs with specific improvement / capacity issues are being encouraged to apply to the partnership for Essential Development Support. This makes funding available to address improvement needs which are not being met elsewhere within the programme. So far, this has been used by a number of councils, including Derwentside DC, which has used the funding to embed a Transformational Leadership Capacity Programme.

Capital Ambition is working towards ensuring London has no zero or one star councils by 2008, and ensuring that 90% of councils have a positive direction of travel statement. A three-phase work programme is being undertaken to facilitate continuous improvement in all authorities. Around a third of Capital Ambition's budget will be spent on this strand of work. To date, a package of £325,000 has been awarded to LB Waltham Forrest. In addition to working with three, one star authorities, engagement meetings have also taken place with the London Boroughs of Lambeth and at Barking & Dagenham, which were awarded two stars at CPA, but were considered slow to improve. Under Phase B, support packages will be agreed with the remaining two star authorities (Barnet, Harrow, Hillingdon, Merton and Redbridge), and Chief Executives from the Operational Sub-group have been allocated to these to discuss these support needs. Phase C will involve offering support to 3 and 4 star rated authorities (23 in total) and the London Fire & Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA).

In Devon the Good Initiatives Fund has been established. Bids have to be from a minimum of two partners and are assessed against a number of criteria. So far, seven projects have received funding. Projects include the development of a risk assurance framework and coaching, training and awareness raising, the development of the MOSAIC initiative to map the socio-economic and demographics of households in each District and the development of a procurement strategy.

8 Delivery mechanisms

Mechanisms to support the delivery of capacity building activity fall under the following broad headings

8.1 Use of existing national programmes

Use of existing CBP National Programmes, and regional and local variations of these programmes, continues to be a feature of Improvement Partnership activity. The DIP has been engaged with IDeA, having purchased a small number of places on the Advanced Leadership Programme, and having also commissioned IDeA to run the county's Local Leadership Academy. In Leicestershire and Rutland there have been links with both IDeA and SOLACE, and engagement with Ashridge. NWIN are currently building upon good practice from national programmes to feed into their current work.

London's Improved Scrutiny Programme, (which was initially established under ALG management of the Improvement Partnership and draws upon IDeA's Peer Review model) is to be subsumed into the Capital Ambition work programme. This will complement current 'critical friend' activity and provide further opportunities for regional, sub-regional and cross-sector working. Additionally, in London approaches from some of the National Programmes are being adopted to develop work under Capital Ambition. For example, peer review activity is at the heart of Capital Ambition work programme and follows a similar approach to Gateway Reviews and the Peer Clearing House. Additionally, work to achieve the Equalities Standard regionally takes a similar approach to the Employers Organisation Diversity in Districts Programme).

Last year, it was reported that discussions had begun in the Northeast with national providers about how national programmes might be adapted to meet the specific needs of Northeast councils and reflect regional local priorities. This year, IPNELG has had involvement in the National Performance Management Programme (although further evaluation is required by them to determine whether or not this has represented good value for money). Both the Northeast and London have been engaged with IDeA with a view to further developing capacity building activity related to the National Graduate Development Programme. Although there has been fairly wide use of national programmes, some respondents in Improvement Partnerships expressed concern that they can be expensive and inflexible, and questions have been raised about the quality and relevance/applicability of programme content. This may help to explain why Programme Providers have also reported difficulties in accessing the partnerships and promoting the National Programmes.

8.2 External Consultancy Support

Buying in external consultancy to develop projects also remains a key delivery mechanism. Examples of on-going and planned work supported by external organisations are evident in several of the case study Improvement Partnerships. For example, in Devon the Improvement Partnership's use of external consultants to support delivery is well established, with several external organisations (IDeA, Audit Commission, OPM and a high profile independent consultant) having been appointed to facilitate events on strategic planning and visioning. Additionally, in Devon, a 'Provider Pool' has been established to allow authorities to access support for organisational development, training and consultancy from approved external providers. As a list of regionally approved providers, the Provider Pool acts as a tool to assist authorities in accessing the market more easily than they might ordinarily be able to, principally because of the lack of resources available to individual District Councils to attract private sector assistance, especially in rural or relatively remote and inaccessible geographical locations.

In the Northeast, external consultants were commissioned by IPNELG to undertake an evaluation of the improvement programme. This work has run alongside existing delivery, with the aim of assisting the Improvement Partnership to identify existing activities that could replicable, and that could enable the Partnership to continue to have an impact on the sector's capacity after Communities and Local Government funding comes to an end.

Similarly in the West Midlands, consultants have been employed to undertake an evaluation of the WMRIEP's work. This will indicate, for example, whether the current agreed regional priorities need to be adapted to cater for changing needs, and assist in assessing added value.

Case study research with the NWIN highlights plans to commission external consultants in the future to support regional-level activities: Shared-learning forms a significant part of the Northwest Improvement Partnership's current work. In mid-2006, NWIN hosted the region's Local Government Showcase, which was partly based around the Regional Learning Plan's priorities, and aimed to act as a forum for discussion and good practice sharing. The format and content was felt by delegates to be highly relevant, however, only around a third of the region's authorities were represented at the event. NWIN intend to further develop this work by planning an event for 2007, to be organised on a larger scale by an external agency, as yet to be confirmed.

In Leicestershire and Rutland, stakeholders acknowledged that consultants were used more frequently when the Improvement Partnership was at an earlier stage of development and consequently had less capacity to deliver. Some of the Improvement Partnership's future work will be supported by commissioning external support (i.e. LRIP plan to buy in training provision to support work around member development), however, there appears to have been a slight shift away from the use of consultants at LRIP, and a move towards using 'internal capacity'. For example, previously, Leicestershire and Rutland commissioned a consultant to act as Administrator for the

Improvement Partnership Board. It has since been found to be more cost-effective to tap into the existing resources, splitting the role into two posts and using two administrative officers employed by Blaby District Council to undertake the work.

8.3 Development of new tools and programmes

There is evidence that innovative and original initiatives around performance management and research and development are being devised by Improvement Partnerships. One example of this is the on-going work of Capital Ambition in developing peer mentoring as a key way to produce performance improvements in poor and weak authorities. A specific instance of this work in action is the programme of assistance offered to the London Borough of Waltham Forrest. As one of only three authorities in London rated one-star at CPA, Waltham Forrest has been amongst the first in the region to receive assistance from Capital Ambition. The assistance received has been specifically tailored to Waltham Forrest's needs to support performance improvement in identified areas, and has partly focussed on implementing a Borough-wide Libraries' Improvement Programme and a series of Service Reviews. This element of support has involved the use of peers from other authorities to facilitate and provide assistance in undertaking the work, and to share good practice approaches gained from experiences in their own authorities. Support to Waltham Forrest under Capital Ambition also includes an executive coaching programme (designed to enhance leadership capacity), and a study around services, value for money and performance improvement.

Work is on-going under Capital Ambition to provide peer support for the region's other one-star rated authorities; Hackney and Havering. During the fieldwork period for this phase of the evaluation, discussions had been undertaken with both authorities by Capital Ambition to ascertain their support needs. These suggest that future assistance at Hackney is likely to include 'Critical Friend' activity to support improvement in at least one of the authority's professional services, and possible work to address the staffing issues amongst the Revenues and Benefits Directorate. In light of discussions at Havering, future support is likely to link to the authority's Improvement Plan, and also take the form of the provision of officer and member development programmes to develop leadership capacity.

Additionally, (and related to London), although not yet at implementation stage, it is envisaged that the Performance Office will act as a useful diagnostic tool to highlight and allow the Improvement Partnership to address service areas where performance across the region is poor, or where there are significant local disparities.

The development and use of innovative and original tools being used is also evident in the Leicestershire and Rutland Improvement Partnership. Following work to develop their own competency frameworks, Leicestershire and

Rutland Improvement Partnership are in the process of developing aligned and targeted training courses to middle managers.

In the Northeast, work has been undertaken by IPNELG to increase the involvement of elected members in the operation of the Partnership. There is clear recognition that increased member involvement is needed to contribute to the longer term impact of IPNELG. Initiatives to support this, which provide members with formal mechanisms to influence and review the shape and progress of the Partnership, include a 'Member Review Group' and 'Member Sounding Board'. Additionally, IPNELG has begun production of a quarterly newsletter to all Northeast elected members (first published October 2006), which covers a range of issues including promoting the District Vision work stream and the NEREO/IDeA Member Development Charter.

In the West Midlands, three new projects which are being developed at present which were considered innovative were:

- The regional coaching pool, which involves 13 authorities at present. Individuals are training to become coaches who can them be deployed in other authorities, and authorities will be recompensed for supporting others. In terms of best practice, the coaching pool is considered to be unique.
- The steps to leadership programme. This aims to get individuals to identify and respond to learning – for example carrying out an 'organisational raid' on another body, taking back ideas and then operationalising them.
- The regional resource library which will evaluate training and development in the longer term.

Another good example of the development of a new programme is the Stafffordshire Plus Partnership which received its funding in Oct 2005. This was very shortly before funding was devolved to the region. It has since moved from an informal structure to a full-blown delivery partnership, and is presently beginning delivery after a long and complex development period. The complexity results from the fact that there are now 13 authorities involved (as Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service joined the original 12 earlier this year) and the project will deliver across five specific strands (leadership, management development, member development, partnership working and customer service).

8.4 Joint project development

There is also evidence of significant joint project development. In Devon, projects under the Good Initiatives Fund (GIF), and particularly the regional consultation project are generally viewed as having been successful in encouraging partnership working, and allowing for benefits to be shared with key stakeholders. In Leicestershire and Rutland the partnership are engaged with the Staffordshire Plus Improvement Partnership and LGEM with a view to jointly deliver a shared learning event in 2007. An additional

example of partnership working in the LRIP is evident through the current partnership arrangement with 'Jobs Go Public', centred around the development of a web based training needs assessment product, to support the development of middle managers.

In London, at this phase of the evaluation not all delivery streams were fully operational. However, current and planned work involving the use of peer mentors and reviewers is envisaged to provide an effective way to provide a pooled resource for performance improvement and sharing knowledge, good practice and expertise that will lead to substantial cost savings in comparison to the cost of buying in external consultancy services).

One key example of joint working is the establishment of the NWIN's Communities of Interest work stream, and will encourage groups of local authorities to work collaboratively to address areas of joint concern and in a way that will enhance learning for the whole region. NWIN is currently inviting proposals from its members around a number of priorities that have been identified through the Regional Learning Plan, and a budget of £500,000 has been allocated for this work.

8.5 Establishing a shared infrastructure

There are several examples of initiatives developed to support capacity building and improvement activity, and which act as a forum for shared learning, and dissemination. The North West's Centre for Local Governance remains a key example. Current partnership work with the University of Manchester is seen as a catalyst for continued improvement, and as a source of teaching and shared learning, research and consultancy on local government in an increasingly complex environment, and it is hoped that this work will be sustained after the initial 3 year support from Communities and Local Government comes to an end. Although not at implementation stage, it is envisaged that the Centre for Research and Development planned under Capital Ambition will fulfil a similar role.

In Devon, work to establish a shared infrastructure is evident via the Learning and Improvement Portal (LIP). Widely regarded as a key sustainable outcome of the Devon Improvement Programme's work; the Learning and Improvement Portal acts as a primary means of communicating the progress of the DIP. The LIP is a widely used, 'one stop' source for accessing information such as Improvement Partnership project management documents, learning and development information, and online course material for officers and members in partner authorities. The Portal is also a means of accessing outputs from the Improvement Partnership such as the Partnership toolkit and supporting questionnaires and self-assessments, and contains articles on improvement themes such as coaching, organizational change and service improvement models.

9 Challenging and supporting poor performers

Improvement Partnerships are generally mindful of the sector and region-wide benefits, as well as individual authority benefits that can arise from supporting improvements in lower performing authorities. Additionally, peer competition, a commitment to challenging poor performance through collaborative working and a culture of continuous improvement are all key drivers in improving poor performance.

Feedback at this phase of the evaluation, illustrates that specific support for poor performers is variable. The case study research illustrates that activity to support poor and weak authorities falls as a central area of work within some partnerships, but is not focused upon in others. At present, work to support poor performers is currently being undertaken in the Improvement Partnerships in the North West (NWIN), Northeast (IPNELG), Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council (KCC/SBC) and London (Capital Ambition). In comparison, in both the Leicestershire and Rutland and Devon Partnerships, support for poorer performers had a much lower profile.

Amongst Improvement Partnerships which have established support for poor and weak authorities, provision appears to be delivered both as a remedial and preventative measure, and there is some evidence to suggest that partnerships involved in such work are committed to fostering a culture of continuous improvement. This can generally be categorized as taking a "three-pronged" approach:

- Offering targeted support (specific service/delivery area) to individual authorities where there is evidence of poor performance (i.e. through CPA ratings).
- Working with satisfactory authorities to further improve their performance;
- Working with good and excellent authorities to maintain their performance and to promote good practice sharing with others.

CPA ratings were highlighted as a tool for identifying poor and weak authorities and as an incentive or target in addressing poor performance.

Both NWIN and Capital Ambition operate with the aim of ensuring that by 2008 there are no poor or weak authorities in their regions. Both have developed mechanisms to identify poorly performing authorities which could benefit from support, or which could potentially need support in the future, and have earmarked resources to supporting under-performing authorities.

London has been the last region among the case studies to formally establish its Improvement Partnership. As a result, delivery activities are at more of an

inception stage compared with some other regions. Despite this, however, the Partnership is in the process of designing, finalising and delivering specific programmes to provide support to poor and weak authorities. Currently, a programme, in its initial stages is being delivered to provide tailored assistance to authorities in London with a one star CPA rating. Support packages are designed through consultation with focus authorities around their specific needs, and may range from financial support or mentoring, to training and management and leadership development programmes. Highlighting and sharing good practice in service delivery via the use of peer reviews and peer support has also been central to London's approach.

To encourage continuous improvement in authorities across the region, Capital Ambition has outlined plans to extend this work in the future. It is further envisaged that this will help to further improve the performance of 'reasonable' authorities, and maintain performance in those rated as good or excellent. Whilst there are currently no poor performing authorities in the North West, NWIN has similarly allocated specific funding for 'recovery' work, and in working in partnership with Government Office NW, Audit Commission and IDeA to devise a programme which will allow the Improvement Partnership to identify and intervene where authorities appear to be at risk of becoming poor performers.

In London, the Northeast and the North West, programmes are being developed to allow the Improvement Partnerships to concentrate on improving performance in areas highlighted as being of concern. In the North West, this work will be delivered under the "communities of interest" programme, and will operate at sub-regional level, allowing groups of authorities to work together. The activity is planned to focus upon ideas around innovation, issues outlined in the Local Government White Paper and the Beacon Programme, with applications for funding to be invited in 2007.

In London, a "Performance Office" is in development and will act as a tool to collect data and identify service areas where authorities across the region appear to have common performance problems. It is envisaged that once operational this will assist the IP to address problem areas, and help to effectively target resources.

In the Northeast, providing support to poor and weak authorities fits within two of IPNELG's seven core work streams: Firstly, as part of its "Challenge & Inspire" work stream, IPNELG is developing a series of events, workshops and seminars for elected members and officers. These are designed to focus on new approaches to deliver improvements in front-line services, which will highlight areas identified as a priority for all authorities in the region (and particularly those defined as poorest performing). Services and issues to be addressed will include Planning, Children's Services, partnership working, organisational development and management. In addition, under the heading of "Essential Development Support" IPNELG is providing funding for individual authorities to *'address those improvement needs which are not being met elsewhere within the programme'.*

The Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council partnership embodies a unique relationship, and performance is regularly monitored via an established performance management system (the Status Report and a regular cycle of recently streamlined meetings). Support for Swindon Borough Council in addressing poor performance is available via an active mentoring and coaching framework, using a variety of management techniques to encourage staff to challenge existing procedures or workplace behaviours. Whilst this arrangement has generally worked well, a small number of staff have questioned the clarity of the partnership, the distinction between supervision and mentoring, and around issues such as confidentiality.

In Devon, although targeted work for poor performers has not been a key theme, a limited amount of assistance has been offered to support poor and weak authorities to support improvement activity. Examples of this include high level consultations in poor performing authorities to ascertain support needs and explore ways to address poor performance, and providing poor or weak authorities with access to additional funding to participate on training programmes.

In the Leicestershire and Rutland Improvement Partnership there is no specific work to support poor and weak authorities. At present, North West Leicestershire is categorised as a 'weak' authority in the region; however, since North West Leicestershire is in receipt of Direct Support from the CBP it was not felt to be appropriate for the Partnership to target any further support activity.

In the West Midlands, work has been undertaken with the Audit Commission to assist in identifying authorities which are likely to be following receive a negative direction of travel assessment. Agencies then work jointly (and tactfully) to offer support to prevent problematic inspection results. It was pointed out that it was 'pointless to wait for CPA' but rather appropriate to adopt a proactive approach.

Shared learning continues to be a core part of improvement activity in supporting poor and weak authorities. Current activities such as workshops, training, seminars and mentoring provide an opportunity for exploring innovative ways of working, sharing good practice, and promoting discussion between authorities. This approach also recognizes that authorities rated as "poor" or "weak" have areas of excellence in their practice which they can share with others, with a potential overall effect of building confidence and morale in those authorities.

A number of challenges in addressing poor and weak performers are evident. For instance, the intense activity around implementing their own improvement activities can be a barrier to lower performing authorities engaging in partnership activities as they often lack the spare capacity to shape the direction and content of Improvement Partnerships. There was also some sense that poor and weak performers often require basic level

support which means that the types of activities developed jointly by Improvement Partnerships are less relevant to their needs.

Several respondents from Improvement Partnerships acknowledge professional sensitivities and difficulties around challenging poor performance. The importance of striking an appropriate balance in challenging poor performance and offering support in a manner that does not jeopardise working relationships, or hinder partnership working was recognised. In considering ongoing work to challenge and address poor performance, questions might be raised around whether the process is more effective at sub-regional as opposed to regional level, and around the capacity and appropriateness of District authorities' to challenge the performance of Counties.

It is difficult to gauge what kind of overall, sector-wide impact Improvement Partnerships are having in providing support to poor and weak authorities. In the case of the London IP, it is felt that delivery activities are not yet developed enough to make an accurate assessment.

Case study research highlights authorities in the Northeast to be improving particularly well in comparison with most other regions, although the range of improvement activities undertaken by IPNELG makes it difficult to assess at this stage what impact the Improvement Partnerships might be having on council performance. Evidence of high citizen/customer satisfaction and authority improvement across the region may indicate that the Improvement Partnership is making a positive contribution. Similarly, in other areas (i.e. North West, Kent County Council & Swindon Borough Council) improvements in CPA ratings could suggest impact as a result of action to challenge poor performance.

10 Impact

10.1 General

When asked about impacts from the work of Improvement Partnerships, many respondents highlighted the difficulty in first identifying impacts, especially where these relate to vague or abstract concepts such as 'leadership' or 'partnership' and second in attributing the achievement of these to the work of Improvement Partnerships where causal linkages are potentially complex and there are many potential alternative causal variables. Finally, many of the respondents suggested that the timescales relevant to the achievement of impacts in terms of capacity building were often long-term and, as such, questioned the extent to which they could be measured within the timeframe of the evaluation.

While noting these qualifications, the main reported impact across the different Improvement Partnership case studies was reported as increased incidences of partnership working between partners and also increased capacity to undertake partnership work. This latter aspect was often associated with 'soft' evidence such as increased confidence or trust in partner organisations, and, crucially, their staff. The establishment and development of personal networks and relationships between key staff both at the leadership of the partners and in relation to key functional areas (such as corporate performance and improvement, HR, communications, consultation) was frequently cited as evidence of increased partnership capacity, with individual respondents reporting merely that they now "know who to ring" when trying to work collaboratively with another partner. In the Northeast, several respondents identified the Improvement Partnership as having achieved significant "reach" into the organisational structures of partner authorities.

These bonds of trust and familiarity are key to establishing a positive learning curve of cooperation, where experience of cooperation incrementally leads to increased further cooperation. There was evidence that the case study partnerships were facilitating the generation of incrementally increasing cooperation between different partners as a result of the positive experiences of working together through the Improvement Partnership. For instance, in Devon several of the partner authorities had begun developing a small number of shared service and back-office functions subsequent to the establishment of the DIP, with some respondents specifically attributing their ability to do this as having been increased by their experience of working together through DIP. Respondents in Leicestershire and Rutland also reported that their Improvement Partnership experience had "stimulated discussion on where we move on towards shared services".

Generally, these partnership impacts were more pronounced than were impacts in relation to specific examples of performance improvement in

individual local authorities. For the most part this was so because of the early stage of development and delivery of most of the case study partnerships. While it is disappointing not to be able to demonstrate substantial progress in achieving impacts, these findings echo those of other research into partnership establishment. For instance, the formation of partnerships has been compared with typologies of team development where the initial stages can be time consuming and even conflict ridden as progress is made toward settled and widely shared values, priorities and working relationships (McMorris, 2005). The national evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) suggests that many LSPs, which have been in existence for considerably longer than most Improvement Partnerships, are still in the process of becoming settled and embedded into organisational structures and working patterns.

Indeed the LSP evaluation draws an important distinction between process, governance and service outcomes which is relevant to the assessment of Improvement Partnership impacts. Process impacts are considered to be:

> *"working more closely with partners, sharing information and staff resources, and financial collaboration via pooled funding of activity."*

Governance outcomes are

> *"the development of a collective vision and agreed strategy; widening the range of interests involved in local decision making; creating a stronger local voice; improving the perceived legitimacy of local governance; and exercising more effective influence locally and nationally."*

By contrast, service outcomes are described as those which concern scrutiny of partner plans and strategies to ensure alignment and the achievement of enhanced social outcomes (European Institute for Urban Affairs et al., 2006:10-13). The majority of evidence of impact collected through the follow-on stage of the Improvement Partnership fieldwork is related to process issues, though there is evidence that some of the Partnerships may be in the early stages of achieving governance related impacts also.

10.2 Achievement of Partnership Objectives

Each of the Partnerships set its own overall objectives. However, in most cases the Partnerships were still in an early stage of development. As such, for the most part they had made insufficient progress to be able to measure their achievement of their own objectives. Notable exceptions to this were the Devon Improvement Programme, whose funded programme of activities formally ended in October 2006, and the partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council.

The Devon Improvement Programme set its own objectives as follows:

The DIP will enhance and develop Devon authorities' confidence, leadership and skills to drive forward improvement as well as developing their capacity to learn, innovate and share knowledge and expertise on what works and how.

The collaborative working in Devon will be stronger with some services being jointly delivered, DIP is perceived as ground-breaking due to the breadth and depth of the collaborative approach.

While the extent of impacts achieved in each of the partner authorities through the Devon Improvement Programme were unclear, most had made some impact in at least some of the partner authorities. Generally, these impacts were related to the enhancement of the confidence, leadership and skills of the partner authorities. The more demonstrable impact was related to the capacity of the organisations to work together, having built networks of individual contact and personal and organisational trust. This did mean that there was additional joint working, and knowledge sharing. For instance, the Learning and Improvement Portal – a web based knowledge sharing platform and gateway to e-learning – includes shared resources such as induction programmes and competency frameworks and includes discussion forums. In a number of cases, authorities have built on links established and cemented through the Devon Improvement Programme to develop shared back office and service delivery initiatives. Moreover, following the completion of the projects a number of Devon-wide forums have been established or re-invigorated such as the Devon Improvement Group, the Devon Consultation Officers Group, the Devon Communications Group and the Devon Member Services Officers group. These groups provide the infrastructure that might facilitate joint working, including enhanced two-tier working, in the future. In addition, the DIP Steering Group has been retained as a mechanism of driving joint project development in the future.

The Kent-Swindon partnership was intended to improve the performance of Social Services in Swindon, as measured by the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The ultimate aim was for Swindon to achieve a two Star rating. At the end of 2005 Swindon Borough Council received a one star rating from the Commission for Social Care Inspection, an interim outcome that was widely regarded as providing evidence of considerable improvement, with at least some causality being attributed to the partnership with Kent County Council. Evidence from the follow-on research suggests that Swindon have continued to improve, with evidence of increased organisational and individual confidence and ownership of the improvement agenda, suggesting that progress continues to be made toward the two star objective.

Several of the other Partnerships have also made some progress toward achieving some early impacts. For instance, partners in IPNELG reported that there had been gains in knowledge sharing, and the establishment of a network of communications managers had helped to strengthen and coordinate the public relations capacity of the sector in the region.

10.3 Achievement of national CBP Objectives

Fieldwork in each of the Partnerships explored the extent to which the Partnerships had been able to make progress toward achieving national objectives established for them. These are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: National CBP Objectives

Generic Impact Expected	Level expected at…
Development of new skills	Individual
Increased confidence	Individual
Increased job satisfaction	Individual
Better business planning and target setting	Team/Authority/Sector
Promotion of equality and diversity	Team/Authority/Sector
Improved recruitment and retention	Team/Authority/Sector
Improved project and programme management	Individual/Team/Authority
Better performance management	Team/Authority/Sector
Improved learning, more innovation and sharing of good practice	Individual/Team/Authority/Sector
Service improvements	Team/Authority/Sector
Leadership	Individual/Team/Authority/Sector
Responding to central government initiatives	Individual/Team/Authority/Sector
Responding to local needs	Individual/Team/Authority/Sector

It is worth noting that the Partnerships placed much more emphasis on their own more specific objectives than any list of national objectives and in most cases they did not identify with the expected impacts listed here as a statement of what the Partnerships were to achieve, though there were elements of commonality between the Partnerships' own aims and objectives and those cited here. Moreover, most of the Partnerships were still at an early stage of development and, as such, it was difficult to measure the extent to which they were achieving these objectives. However, some evidence was available and this is reviewed below, under the appropriate headings.

10.3.1 Impact at Sector/Partnership level

The main impact of the Improvement Partnerships to date has been in the establishment of an infrastructure to support partnership working and an increase in the capacity of the partner organisations' capacity to engage in this. This increase in capacity is not related to additional resources but merely

to a change in attitudes, the establishment of personal contacts and networks and increased individual and organisational trust between organisations. These developments are extremely hard to measure or quantify but it was possible to conclude that in most cases there appeared to be some increase in this type of partnership capacity.

Across the other aspects of the national impacts, there was relatively little evidence, in most of the case study Partnerships that any impact had as yet been achieved. The exceptions were the Devon Improvement Programme and the partnership between Swindon Borough Council and Kent County Council. In both these cases the Partnerships had completed or had made substantial progress in implementing their programme of activities.

In Devon, there was evidence across most of the areas expected nationally of some degree of impact. For instance, at a leadership level there was evidence of enhanced working relationships between some Chief Executives and certainly some structures had been put in place that might facilitate new models of two-tier working in the future, with the successful track record of the Steering Group and the decision to retain this being a prime example. In relation to performance management, the legacy of the Devon Improvement Programme is some funded work around establishing the basis for a county-wide self regulatory framework. Improved business planning and target setting was also the subject of legacy work around establishing a 'joint evidence base for Devon' with commonly agreed indicators and performance measures. The Learning and Improvement Portal had established a working infrastructure for sharing knowledge and information in the County. There was also some evidence of innovation being facilitated at the sector level, especially through the establishment of joint consultation practices and use of common software.

In relation to the partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council, the main sector-wide benefit is in relation to the successful piloting of local authority mutual support. While the initial intention was to pilot a specific structure and mechanism by which this could be facilitated, perhaps the more valuable impact has simply been that this sort of intra-sector partnership can work.

10.3.2 Impact at authority level

Impacts at the level of individual partner authorities were also explored. Again, most of the case study partnerships were too early in their stage of development for respondents and documentary evidence to identify specific organisational impacts. However, again evidence of such impacts was available from Devon and Swindon and, to a much smaller extent, some of the other case studies.

In Swindon several interventions and initiatives developed through the partnership with Kent CC were thought to have improved the recruitment and retention capacity of the authority, with the social services department now reporting virtually full staffing for the first time. Several interventions had also been implemented to improve staff job satisfaction, though it was

less clear whether impacts had been as yet documented in this regard. A wide range of measures had been introduced to strengthen internal systems and processes and, ultimately, to improve the quality of service delivery. Achievement of the one star inspection provides at least some evidence of their success and future inspections will be able to demonstrate further progress in this regard.

In Devon, there was evidence in some of the partner authorities of self-reported increased leadership capacity as a result of participation in DIP projects. This was not, though, universal and in some cases DIP projects had been only one of several causal influences which had led to increased leadership capacity. In relation to performance management, at least some of the Partners reported that they had adopted improved performance management processes, at least partly as a result of external support commissioned through the DIP. A small number of the partner authorities had also been able to improve their project and programme management capacity as a result of DIP project work. There was also limited evidence of innovation in a small number of partners, for instance in the establishment of a joint consultation unit, hosted by one of the partners and which now operated annual citizen satisfaction surveys. Those authorities that appeared to have benefited the most from the opportunity to share knowledge and good practice tended to be higher performing authorities, with lower performers identifying barriers to taking up such opportunities.

10.3.3 Impact at individual level

At an individual level, where case study partnerships had commissioned training or development activities these had enhanced the capacity of individuals. For instance, in Devon senior officers and elected members had clearly benefited from participation on individual training and development courses. Other officers had also benefited from such opportunities. However, it was frequently reported that the most beneficial aspect of these opportunities was the development of contacts and networks with individuals in neighbouring authorities and mutual learning from experiences. For instance, this was a key theme in the responses of beneficiaries of officer and member development interventions in Devon.

10.4 Cost and efficiency

Little firm evidence was collected across the Improvement Partnerships of any quantifiable cost savings as a result of the work of the partnerships. However, there were several areas where respondents identified the role of Improvement Partnerships as potentially having cost benefits, including through:

- **Organisational efficiencies** – some respondents thought that their authority was more efficient as a result of the beneficial impact of improvement support, facilitated by the partnerships. For instance, in the partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council improved recruitment and retention levels in Swindon were thought to have generated some savings, though no attempt to quantify these had been undertaken.
- **Joint procurement** – for instance in Devon a joint procurement exercise had been undertaken to purchase a particular piece of consultation software which all the partner authorities are now using. Many of the authorities reported that without a joint exercise, purchasing this software would have been much more expensive. However, while cost savings will have been realised, these are not in the same scale as would be possible if the authorities shared a set of procurement rules and processes. The lack of these had led to time delays
- **Economies of scale** in the purchasing of capacity building support from external organisations.
- Gaining access to resources that could not otherwise be afforded. In Devon the **increased buying power** realised by working together, meant that the authorities could gain access to consultation software and organisational development provision that few of the partners would have been able to access without acting together. Increased buying power was also thought to allow providers to "add value because of the scale".
- Development of **shared projects** – a different joint consultation project developed by three of the DIP partner authorities had led to more cost effective consultation and analysis activities than might otherwise have been the case. There was also some evidence of 'cooperative spill-over' into other areas in both Devon and the Leicestershire and Rutland partnership, meaning that there may be indirect cost benefits as a result of the increased partnership working and shared project development (e.g. shared back office functions) that results from the learning curve of cooperation in Improvement Partnerships.
- Through **rationalisation of regional infrastructure** – the moves already underway in some of the case study partnerships and heralded by the White Paper, to rationalise regional level infrastructure, such as Regional Centres of Excellence and Regional Improvement Partnerships, was identified as avoiding duplication, in at least two case study partnerships.

10.5 Facilitators of positive impact

10.5.1 Shared learning

Many of the Partnerships cited the establishment of infrastructure to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and information as a useful catalyst for capacity building. For instance, in Devon the establishment of the Learning and Improvement Portal has provided a forum for sharing information and knowledge. This extends from discussion on approaches to management and organisational development to sharing documents, such as induction programmes, competency frameworks or strategies. Sharing experience was also cited as a key benefit of joint development and training activities,

especially for elected members, and the mixture of Districts and Unitaries in the County meant that there was scope for learning from the experience of others, such as in relation to CPA or LAAs, where the Unitaries or Districts had prior experience.

In London, peer support has been adopted as a significant aspect of the overall Improvement Partnership. Side-payments are included to incentivise the release of staff and use is made of the Peer Clearing House to augment the availability of peers from within the region. The emphasis is on sharing the benefits of particular expertise and experience within other local authorities. The NWIN partnership in the North West places a great deal of emphasis on the knowledge hub being developed with Manchester University. The partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council is based almost entirely on the sharing of knowledge and expertise within the sector.

The issue of knowledge sharing was frequently cited by fieldwork respondents throughout the evaluation. A number of common themes emerged from this. First, was a general preference on reliance on expertise from within the sector rather than developing dependency on external consultants. Second, was a concern to learn from experience at the appropriate level. For instance, while the Learning and Improvement Portal was thought to be useful, some respondents were concerned that the best practice, or most useful experience, might not be available from neighbouring authorities. Similar concerns were raised in the North West.

10.5.2 Delivery Mechanisms

Consideration of the different delivery mechanisms used did not reveal any fully conclusive trends in relation to which is most successful overall. However, there was some emerging evidence which tallied with that produced through other aspects of the National Evaluation about the types of delivery mechanism that are appropriate to different objectives and contexts. For instance, work with individual authorities appears to be better suited to the initial phase of Improvement Partnerships, where there is a need to sustain partner commitment through establishing quick wins, and in supporting poor performers who often lack the capacity to engage in the 'lobbying' that shapes joint or shared improvement projects.

While there is evidence to suggest that the motivation to achieve quick wins has led to some Partnerships subsidising a small number of places for each partner on National Programmes or other national training and development courses. While individuals may benefit from this, there is little additionality and it can detract from the benefits that arise from either developing joint capacity or more specific improvement work in individual authorities. It is notable that this is slightly different to where an authority itself decides that it would like to send staff to participate on National Programmes. Evidence from the National Programme aspect of the evaluation of CBP suggests that the most positive organisational impacts from the Programmes were possible where the authorities were committed to participation and transferring individual development to organisational change. There was some evidence

that these reasons led to such strategies failing to establish additional partner commitment.

The use of National Programmes in a regional context or the development of regional or partnership-wide individual development programmes can have some significant advantages, particularly in broadening out partnership activities within the authorities by facilitating wider personal networks and relationships. Other widely cited advantages include learning from the experiences of other authorities. However, in developing such initiatives, care has to be taken to ensuring that the individual development programmes meet the requirements of all partners so that the authorities make sufficient commitment to the programmes and therefore take measures to ensure that the benefits of individual development are translated to organisational change. Further, it is desirable to ensure that sufficient numbers of individuals have access to the programme at an authority level to ensure critical mass and increased opportunity for organisational change to occur.

Commissioning has been used as an approach to delivering programmes in at least one case study area. IPNELG has adopted a commissioning approach to the allocation of Communities and Local Government funds in furtherance of their strategic priorities, with the Partnership, its sub-groups and individual officers (including secretariat staff, support agency officers and representatives of partner authorities) devoting considerable work to identifying precisely what shape each of the programmes should take. This has made it possible for the Partnership to put out to tender invitations for suppliers to deliver specific pieces of work that should be of benefit to all IPNELG members.

Each Theme Group is responsible for overseeing the commissioning process for the aspect of the programme over which they have control, with lead responsibility being shared between one Chief Officer and a support agency representative. Reports on progress are provided to the full Board, so that the Partnership is able to maintain an overview of the whole programme's progress. A 'traffic light' system is in operation, enabling partners to identify activities most in need of their intervention, and to ensure that targets are met and priorities are addressed adequately.

10.5.3 Commitment and ownership

Securing the appropriate degree of commitment is essential in a successful Improvement Partnership. In most of the case study partnerships, partners got more out of the partnership where they were fully committed to it. This enabled them to shape the broad areas in which the Improvement Partnerships focused, the more specific content of improvement support to ensure that it fully reflected their needs and demands, the mechanism by which this was to be delivered and also to be able to internalise the impact of improvement activities.

There are several examples of this from the case studies, both where commitment had led to positive benefits and where a lack of it had led to less pronounced impacts. For instance, in Devon, one of the authorities had

been unable to allocate resources to the design and establishment of the Improvement Partnership, and as such, felt that the areas covered by the DIP and the specifics of how they were to be delivered did not reflect their capacity building needs. By contrast, other partners had been more fully engaged and as such felt that they had gained from all the different programmes of support. In London, it was reported that the commitment of the partner authorities offered Capital Ambition the legitimacy to challenge partner authorities about their performance and improvement plans:

> *"it feels as if when we go and talk to those councils its an issue that's being sorted out within the family rather than having to resort to someone external" (Senior Officer, Capital Ambition).*

Securing this level of commitment is not an easy task and forms a key challenge for Improvement Partnerships, as one respondent in the North West noted:

> *"it is a major achievement to get some of these chief executives in the same room" (Senior Officer, NWIN).*

In another case study, a major achievement was cited as merely maintaining civil discussions within the main governance board and having agreed, without major fall out, a plan of action to spend a substantial amount of money collectively, rather than simply dividing the resource between the partners on some form of proportional basis.

Securing commitment is not a simple matter of gaining agreement of Chief Executives and Leaders, though this is often necessary. Rather, also important is establishing commitment and ownership lower down in the organisational hierarchy of members, in functional areas. For instance, in developing an HR improvement project, such as for example new and shared competency frameworks, it is necessary that the relevant HR professionals in each organisation are fully involved and committed. If this is not the case, outputs – such as a new competency framework – are often resisted and fail to result in organisational change. There were a number of examples in the case studies where the failure to gain such commitment had led to the development of initiatives that didn't quite match need or where they failed to gain organisational purchase because of a failure to secure this type of functional commitment.

A variety of different approaches were taken to ensuring commitment among partners. Most of the Improvement Partnerships had used the establishment phase to build commitment and ownership, principally through the collection of data about the needs of the different partner authorities. This was undertaken in a variety of ways. For instance, in Devon, several county-wide meetings were facilitated by a representative of the Audit Commission, highlighting common weaknesses identified by CPA. In the North West, the shape of the Improvement Partnership was influenced through the production of individual organisational learning plans by each of the authorities which were then analysed to produce a regional learning

plan. In London, discussion through the Chief Executives of London Committee helped to both determine needs and build ownership of the Partnership.

Other mechanisms to build ownership have also been used. In Devon, ownership and commitment was promoted through the structure of the governance and delivery arrangements. In terms of governance, all partners were represented by both their Chief Executive and Leader on the Programme board and a formal system of representation was adopted to ensure that all partners were able to influence the Steering Group which met more frequently. The teams which were charged with delivering the specific improvement projects were drawn from within the partner authorities, ensuring widespread formal involvement in delivery. Evidence about the extent to which these measures resulted in higher levels of commitment on the part of partner authorities was difficult to discern. Other measures tried in Devon included a requirement for authorities to produce a short Quarterly Benefits Review, including evidence of impact from engagement with the Improvement Partnership. While the aim of this was to force authorities to focus on the extent to which they were taking advantage of the opportunities available and taking measures to internalise improvement, there was some evidence that the result was to undermine commitment as a result of resentment from key individuals in each authority regarding the administrative burden.

In London, Capital Ambition has attempted to build ownership and commitment by the distribution of 'Mutuality Statements' which must be signed and returned by partner authorities. While there was evidence that partner authorities were committed to the Improvement Partnership, it was difficult to judge the extent to which these statements had been useful in building this.

In both the Northeast and Devon, attempts have been made to broaden and deepen the basis of partner commitment beyond the role of senior officers and elected members on high level governance structures. This has been achieved through the establishment or use of existing networks of similar officers in the different partner organisations, such as the Devon Improvement Group, Member Services Group, Consultation Officers Group. Similar forums have been established in the Northeast, such as a Communications Managers Network, which were reported as having facilitated greater 'reach' into the partner organisations.

Across many of the case studies, a key tactic employed to build ownership and commitment was through establishing 'quick wins'. This had been attempted in a variety of ways. For instance, in Devon, a small number of subsidised places on training courses were offered to partners in advance of the more substantive delivery. The DIP also established a Good Initiatives Fund which allowed smaller partnerships of authorities to bid for support for projects they designed themselves. Again, this helped to deliver some support quickly, building commitment to the Partnership. Similarly, IPNELG has negotiated a preferential rate and provided funding for its members to

send one representative each on an IDeA performance management raining programme. This has allowed partners to identify quickly a direct benefit to them of participating in the partnership.

Even where 'wins' are not necessarily quick, it was found that combining a clear schedule with the promise of authority-specific support can help to build partner commitment in advance of the development of more ambitious joint capacity projects. An example of this is Capital Ambition where a rolling schedule of engagement is planned with all partner authorities at the same time as joint projects, such as the London Performance Office, are being established. The scheduling of authority specific support is informed by an analysis of priority need.

Perhaps the most significant determinants of ownership, however, were harder to quantify or define. For instance, in several case study partnerships one or a small number of charismatic individuals had been able to drive the partnership forward, building commitment among colleagues and partner organisations. Exactly how they did this was less clear. In several cases, the policy context was identified as a key driver of partner commitment. The change toward the new CPA and subsequently the shift towards more sector-based responsibility for performance as well as the wider initiatives announced in the White Paper (see Section 4.1) were thought to have given added emphasis to authorities' commitment to the Partnership.

Securing commitment from lower performing authorities can be a specific challenge. This is because these authorities are often very inward focused, with resources concentrated on immediate internal improvement projects. As such, devoting resources to external partnerships can be difficult, meaning that there is a danger that they are unable to influence the nature and design of delivering the potential to mean that they are excluded from the benefits to be derived. There is though grounds to suggest that these issues may be less important in the future than they are now. This is because of the general improvement in performance among many local authorities up to CPA 2005. In addition, the more recently established partnerships among our case studies tended to be focused more explicitly on challenging poor performance and as such this issue tends to be less important.

11 Future role of Improvement Partnerships

11.1 Added Value of the Improvement Partnership Approach

Several significant aspects of added value from the Improvement Partnership approach by respondents with experience of their development and operation in the case study regions and sub-regions:

- Improvement Partnerships create the infrastructure, to facilitate partnership working at regional and sub-regional levels.
- They can facilitate strategic focus at regional level and provide the infrastructure for joint project development and working toward common objectives.
- Improvement Partnerships provide the infrastructure for shared learning between local authorities in the Improvement Partnership area, and can act as a channel for learning and experience from elsewhere to inform the work of local authorities.
- Improvement Partnerships can help to increase cost effectiveness and efficiencies by developing joint improvement capacity, including through rationalisation, achieving economies of scale, promoting rationalisation, joint procurement, shared learning and also shared service delivery.
- Improvement Partnerships can help to sustain coordinated improvement activities over a sufficiently long period of time, when compared to time limited specific funding streams.
- Improvement Partnerships can help to facilitate successful peer support, especially by encouraging the release of peers, through commitment to shared development and the use of financial incentives. Peer support, either individual or organisational, was seen as increasing the commitment of both supporter and supported in comparison to use of external consultancy type support.

11.2 Engagement with local authorities

The two phases of the research revealed that, despite the progress made by Improvement Partnerships, like other partnerships, their establishment can be time and resource consuming, for a variety of reasons. Barriers to partnership working identified by the research suggest:

- Partnership working can be difficult where distances between the partners are large or transport links are poor.

- Difficulties can emerge from conflicting political control in partner organisations. This was mentioned as an important contextual feature in many of the case study partnerships.
- Tensions can also emerge in two-tier areas between County and District tiers. While this was the case, it was noticeable that it was in these areas that the most progress had been made in terms of integrating capacity building activities with achieving outcome-based priorities, through the medium of shared LAAs.
- Tensions can emerge between elected members and officers, where either group views capacity building as a purely managerial task. In either case, this can generate inertia or act as a barrier to the integration of capacity building activity with achieving the strategic objectives of the organisation.
- Releasing staff time for partnership working can be difficult, especially for Poor or Weak authorities or in a difficult financial context.
- Maintaining the commitment of partners can be difficult, especially when time delays occur or where benefits are not directly linked to each partner's needs.
- Different 'starting points' can make partnership working on improvement difficult. For instance, there are difficulties for authorities with different CPA ratings and with different improvement needs. This may mean that joint work tends toward a 'lowest common denominator' level leaving some partners with little to gain.
- It can be difficult to get the right level of commitment from partner organisations, particularly in releasing the right amount and level of seniority in staff time.
- Some respondents highlighted the often competitive environment generated by central government initiatives and policy frameworks which can act as an impediment to cooperation. For instance, this has led in some partnerships to a failure to share knowledge of best practice because of a fear that this will lead to use of the organisation's resources in helping other local councils.
- A large number of partners in the development of joint support and improvement projects can produce a 'lowest common denominator' effect where the relevance and alignment of activities to the priorities of partner organisations decreases. This can then impact on the incentives for partner authorities to engage with the project.

Conversely, in promoting the engagement of local authorities in Improvement Partnerships, the research revealed that the following are helpful:

- The commitment and participation of elected members in the management and governance of the partnership.
- Commitment and participation of chief officers in running/governance of the partnership.
- Developing functional links between partner organisations at other levels of the organisational hierarchy such as through subject specific teams (e.g. consultation officers, performance officers, procurement officers, member services officers, HR officers).

- The input of representatives of key support agencies (e.g. IDeA, Audit Commission) can help to maximise the relevance of the capacity building and improvement activities undertaken and can also help to broker access to further national and regional resources.
- The devolution of responsibility for resources to regional level has helped to generate local authority commitment and engagement by offering them the opportunity to shape the development of support activities. Where partnerships have developed secondary devolution of resources to small groups of their partner authorities, this has worked even better because the relevance of the projects and support developed appears to increase in some proportionate relationship to the number of partners involved.

11.3 Facilitating stronger partnerships between councils

Improvement Partnerships can help to strengthen partnership working between local authorities. One of the major impacts of Improvement Partnerships is that they facilitate the development of organisational and individual connections between authorities, not just at leadership level but also in relation to specific functional or service areas. These linkages have direct partnership benefits around the projects funded or managed through the Improvement Partnership. However, there are also wider, indirect, benefits which accrue from the experience of joint working. So in a small number of the longer running case studies, new joint initiatives had been developed, for instance in shared services or back-office functions, that were attributed, in some small way, by the respondents themselves to closer working facilitated by the Improvement Partnership. As such, there is some tentative evidence to suggest that Improvement Partnerships might generally help to promote a stronger culture and experience of joint working between local authorities.

11.4 Delivering shared outcome-based priorities

Improvement Partnerships can help to facilitate collaborative working to set and achieve common objectives, for instance as expressed through Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs). In the North West, the work of the two county-based sub-regional partnerships (Lancashire and Cheshire) is already focused around building capacity to deliver LAAs:

> *"The Improvement Partnership is doing a lot around Local Area Agreements, in the future these could become an important area" (Senior Officer, NWIN)*

While most Improvement Partnerships had not yet made these linkages explicit, when prompted, most respondents (including some from London, the Northeast, North West, Leicestershire and Rutland and Devon) noted the potential benefits of Improvement Partnerships for building capacity in

support of achieving outcome-based targets. While they were not specifically included in the fieldwork discussion guides[1], some respondents mentioned the utility of using Improvement Partnerships in a similar way to facilitate the agreement and delivery of MAAs. The general evidence, especially around facilitating increased partnership working, suggests that Improvement Partnerships may be an appropriate vehicle for facilitating MAAs. The incorporation of LAA related improvement work in the county context in the North West also suggests that this is feasible. However, it is important in this type of context that all relevant parties are included. For instance, in Leicestershire and Rutland the absence of the County Council from the Improvement Partnership was seen as a barrier to establishing links between funded improvement activity and LAA delivery.

In the county context, it was also thought that this infrastructure could be of benefit in adapting to the need to develop improved two-tier working arrangements. The DIP steering group is being maintained in Devon, despite the end of the funded programme of activities, and an initial assumption that its life was time-limited, partly to provide the infrastructure to respond to this.

11.5 Facilitating community leadership

The White Paper offers added impetus to the role of Councils as leaders of their local communities, influencing and scrutinising the actions of a wider range of local public, private and voluntary sector actors to pursue a combination of local and national priorities. There was some evidence that Improvement Partnerships might be able to facilitate the broader partnerships and capacity to fulfil this role. Several of the case study partnerships already include non-local government partners such as Fire and Rescue Services, National Parks Authorities, and in another discussions are underway to develop linkages with the relevant police authority. In addition, several of the case studies (such as Devon, Northeast) had also undertaken work already to support the partnership management capacity of local authorities. There may also be scope for Improvement Partnerships to broaden the scope of the support that they provide in the future. For instance, some respondents indicated that they could envisage a scenario where it would be appropriate to support capacity building in non-local authority partners where they were involved in the delivery of agreed local priorities, though this was only really suggested in relation to other public sector partners such as the police or health stakeholders:

> *"A lot of things we do are shared objectives…for example, with [Police] Community Support Officers and Neighbourhood Officers… they are similar jobs so we can all benefit" (Senior Officer, Leicestershire and Rutland).*

This sort of development in the role of Improvement Partnerships would need to be carefully monitored but it could mark a significant shift toward

1 The research was undertaken prior to the publication of the White Paper, in most, though not all, cases.

building the capacity of the entire governance and public sector delivery system.

11.6 Implications for developing the Improvement Partnership Approach

The evidence produced by the evaluation suggests that there are certainly grounds for optimism regarding the potential future role of Improvement Partnerships. Specifically, it suggests that there is potential for the role of Improvement Partnerships to be expanded in several ways:

- In relation to **building capacity for specific purposes**, for instance expressed through local priorities and outcome targets.
- In relation to a **wider range of partners** engaged in the delivery of local outcome based targets. These might include, for instance, partners in Local Strategic Partnerships.
- In relation to **monitoring and challenging poor performance** and supporting improvement through self-regulation and peer support.
- Through using Improvement Partnerships as a more effective and rationalised **channel of communication between local authorities and their partners and central government departments** regarding capacity building and improvement support.

However, while there was evidence to suggest that these are possibilities for the future, there was also evidence that many of the Improvement Partnerships, though progressing, do not yet have the capacity to immediately take on all of these functions. Many of the case study Partnerships had not yet or had only recently gone through the 'forming' and perhaps in some cases 'storming' (Tuckman, 1965) stages of partnership establishment. Many were thus only just beginning to deliver their initial strategies. In addition, many Improvement Partnerships have only a small central administrative and management team. Apart from one or two, this team does not comprise a regional or sub-regional leader with the seniority to challenge chief executives or leaders of the partner authorities about their commitment or performance.

The importance of high level engagement in challenging poor performance in particular is clear. If Improvement Partnerships are to be able to challenge poor performers they will need a leadership with sufficient seniority to fulfil the role. Among the case study partnerships only Capital Ambition has a structure which is close to being able to fulfil this role. The director is a former Assistant Chief Executive in London and he is accompanied in diagnostic and planning meetings with 'focus' authorities by senior leadership figures in the sector from the region. Even then, some respondents questioned whether this was yet enough to adequately fulfil the role of challenging and regulating performance. In other Improvement Partnerships, where a senior figure was not in place, the job fell to other partner Chief Executives with the result that some worried about the impact that challenging poor performance would have on their own working

relationships with neighbouring authorities, with the potential to damage rather than enhance partnership capacity.

Similarly, moving toward building the capacity of the wider public service and governance system through Improvement Partnerships will mean that they will need to augment their skills and expertise, as well as resources, to cope with the wider responsibilities and subject areas that this would entail. Again, it is not clear that the Improvement Partnerships yet have the capacity to achieve this.

Finally, the potential for utilising Improvement Partnerships as a single channel of communication from central government to local government may also be difficult to achieve. It is commonplace to highlight the 'humpty dumpty' effect (Audit Commission, 2002:10).which results from local councils having to put together central government policy agendas that become fractured into many different initiatives by the departmental structure of central government, resolving this by using Improvement Partnerships would necessarily change power dynamics within local authorities, as specific parts of the organisational structure were re-orientated to a different channel of communication. This might potentially create an additional layer in communication between specific services and their central government department and involve shifting power dynamics with local authorities. Further, it may also be difficult to bring about central government commitment to such a change, as evidence from the evaluation of Local Area Agreements demonstrates (DCLG, 2006:51-59).

As such any devolution of additional responsibilities to Improvement Partnerships would need to be carefully managed and sequenced and would need to be accompanied by a prior assessment of the capacity of each individual Partnership to take on additional roles. Consultation of local authorities themselves and of Improvement Partnerships would need to be widely undertaken and the resource implications would also need to be carefully considered at this stage.

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Appendix One: Semi-Structured Topic Guide for Second Phase Fieldwork Interviews

- **CONTEXT**

  Please ask respondents to talk about the concept of capacity.

- **Has your view of what capacity and capacity building mean changed over the last year? If so, how and why?**
- **How have your organisation's capacity building needs changed over the last year?**

  How have they changed?
  What has driven these changes?
  What are these capacity building needs now?

- **How do you think that your capacity needs will change over the next two / five years, and what will the drivers be?**

- **CURRENT CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITY (GENERAL)**

  Ask them to speak about capacity building activities that they/their organization is involved with that is not CBP funded. This is so that we get an idea of the relative scale of leverage applied by the CBP.

- **Please describe your current capacity building activities / i.e. how you are addressing capacity needs?**

- **What factors are shaping the success or failure of these?**

  What are the barriers?
  What are the critical success factors or drivers?

- **YOUR IMPROVEMENT PARTNERSHIP**

  Ask them to speak about the background and rationale behind their IP.

- **What have been the main changes or developments in the Improvement Partnership over the last 12 months?**

  Are all the partnership structures now in place?
  Please note the governance structures that are in place, if these were not established last year, or if these have changed?
  Please note how activities are delivered, if these were not established last year, or if these have changed?

- **How successful the process of setting up the Improvement Partnership?**

  ASK THIS IF NOT REALLY ESTABLISHED LAST YEAR
  Prompts:
  Did they get the support they needed?
  Was the process clear?
  What were the barriers/facilitators between the Partners and why?
  What were the barriers/facilitators between the Partners and central govt and why?
  Did the process help refine the bid?
  Was emphasis lost as a result of time lags? etc etc
  How could it have been better?

- **What have the main developments been in the delivery of Improvement activities?**

  PLEASE NOTE WHAT IS FUNDED BY THE CBP
  Have there been any major changes?
  Have they progressed as planned? Why/Why not?
  Do all authorities take part in all elements?

- **How is poor performance challenged?**

  How is poor performance identified?
  What are the problems associated with confronting poor performances?

- **What approach has been taken to target poor performers?**

  Are there any special resources available to poor performers?
  What is done to support them?
  What problems have there been?
  How have these been overcome?
  What has worked well?

- **How have you/your organization participated?**

  What were the key drivers for this?
  Would you have been able to contribute without CBP support?
  Has the organisation contributed any of its own resources?

- **How engaged have elected members been in the IP over the last year?**

  Why, why not?
  In what ways are they engaged?
  What has worked well or less well in getting them engaged?

- **What role has been played by the Regional Directors of Practice over the last year?**

- **Have you had any contact with the CBP National Programmes over the last year?**

(eg programmes provided by IDeA, 4Ps, EO, OPM/Ashridge (Future Leadership Prog etc), Roffey Park, PWC)
Are you aware of them?
Have the providers approached the IP?
Have you considered using them? Why/Why not?
What cost issues have been identified?
How might they be made more relevant to your needs or be more accessible?

- **IMPACT OF THE IMPROVEMENT PARTNERSHIP**

- **What has been the impact of the IP on your department/the authority/sector?**

  In terms of …
  …leadership
  …Responding to central government initiatives
  …Responding to local needs
  …Project management
  …improved business planning systems and target setting
  …improved equality and diversity policies and practices
  …improved programme and project management
  …sharing of good practice
  …innovation
  …service delivery
  …and what are they and how are they better?

- **What impact has there been on recruitment and retention?**

- **What impact has there been in relation to poorly performing authorities?**

- **What has worked well?**

  PLEASE COLLECT ANY EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE.
  Prompts:
  Why, in what ways?

What has facilitated positive impact?
What have been the barriers to positive impact and how were these overcome?

- **What hasn't worked?**

  Prompts:
  Why, in what ways?

- **What lessons have been learned?**

  How generalisable are these?

- **What could have been better?**

  Why, in what ways?

- **Have any cost savings been generated?**

SPECIFICALLY ASK THEM TO QUANTIFY THIS AND TO DEMONSTRATE THEM. ALSO TO OFFER EVIDENCE OF WHAT THEY HAVE DONE WITH THE SAVINGS.

- **THE IMPROVEMENT PARTNERSHIP**

Ask them to speak about the Improvement Partnership approach in general, rather than just their partnership.

- **How does the Improvement Partnership approach add value to capacity building activities?**

  Please describe a practical example of this

- **How does the Improvement Partnership approach generate cost and resource savings?**

  Have any shared projects/services been developed, is there potential for this?
  Have any resource savings been identified?
  Have Capacity Building activities been more efficiently developed than might otherwise be the case?
  Please describe a practical example?

- **What are the key barriers and opportunities involved in the Improvement Partnership approach?**

  Please describe a practical example of this

- **What are the key advantages and disadvantages of the Improvement Partnership approach in relation to intervention, challenge and support to poorly performing authorities?**

  Personal barriers and challenges?
  Political?
  Does challenging poor performance hinder a subsequent working relationship?
  Please describe a practical example of this.

- **Could the Improvement Partnership approach help to build capacity to deliver Local Area Agreements? How and in what way?**

  Please describe a practical example of this

- **Could other organisations usefully be part of the Improvement Partnership? Which ones and why?**

  Please describe a practical example of this

- **POLICY LINKAGES**

Ask them to speak about how their Improvement Partnership and how it relates to wider policy objectives.

- **How do you think that the project is contributing to efficiency?**
- **How do you think that the project is contributing to the implementation of the 'pay and workforce strategy?**
- **How do you think that the project is contributing to equality and diversity?**
- **How do you think that the project is contributing to the shared priorities?**
- **How do you think that the project is contributing to creating sustainable communities?**

- **OTHER COMMENTS**

- **Do you have anything else that you would like to add about capacity, capacity building activities, the CBP or the Improvement Partnership**

Appendix Two: Baseline Report

Capacity Building Programme for Local Government National Evaluation

Improvement Partnership Baseline Report

A report prepared for:

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The research team

The research team included:

- Murray Hawtin (North West Improvement Network);
- Sally-Ann Halliday (Leicestershire and Rutland Improvement Partnership);
- Martin Purcell (Improvement Partnership for North East Local Government);
- Sarah Kelsey (Kent-Swindon Local Government Financing Model);
- Amanda Stevens (Association of London Government Improvement Partnership);
- Lynne Dowson (West Midlands Improvement Partnership); and
- Alex Nunn (Devon Improvement Programme).

Executive Summary

This report presents the baseline findings from an initial phase of fieldwork undertaken in seven Improvement Partnership case studies.

This initial study was intended to establish a baseline in each of the case study Improvement Partnerships which could be used in the future stages of the research to gauge progress and impact.

Concept of capacity and capacity building needs

Whilst respondents reported no single definition of 'capacity' or 'capacity building' a number of common themes did emerge. These tended to focus around the corporate core of local authorities, typically revolving around resources (primarily the numbers and skills of staff) and systems, with a heavy emphasis on the quality of Human Resources functions, finance and performance management. CPA had proven a useful tool in identifying capacity building needs and securing internal support for addressing them, though it also created capacity building needs itself in order to prepare for inspections and implement recommendations. Other factors thought to be important in determining the likely capacity building requirements of local authorities in the future included: implementing central government initiatives; responding to the increased need to work in partnership, particularly in implementing Local Area Agreements; and uncertainty over the future role of local government.

Headline findings

A number of important findings emerged from the research, including:

- Improvement Partnerships are easier to form where existing partnerships or networks are in place, though substantial effort and resource is still required to facilitate the partnership itself, in addition to the development of improvement projects.
- Improvement Partnerships have been able to deliver some positive impacts, even at this early stage in their development, including the development of enhanced general partnership working which has extended from the most senior to other levels of the organisations. Though this has yet to spill over into concrete service-related initiatives the potential for this was identified and Improvement Partnerships have fostered the culture of partnership working, broadening the scope and depth of connections between organisations that is necessary for such joint working in the future. They have thus helped to establish the 'groundwork' for the extension of joint working to service delivery.

- Improvement Partnerships have also been able to promote increased shared learning and there was some evidence that they would lead to more efficient improvement activities than would otherwise have been the case, for instance by improving local authorities' knowledge of the market, enhancing their collective buying power, making procurement more efficient or through cost savings from joint project development.
- However, there were some challenges encountered in developing Improvement Partnerships, especially where there are large distances between partners, where transport links are poor or where there is conflicting political control, tensions between County and District tiers or vastly different starting points (e.g. different CPA ratings) among partners. Releasing sufficient (and sufficiently senior) staff time can also be problematic, as can maintaining effective ongoing commitment.

1 Introduction and Background

The Capacity Building Programme (CBP) for local government was launched in 2003 as a joint Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) – now Communities and Local Government – and Local Government Association (LGA) initiative to support capacity building and improvement activities within local authorities in England. The CBP initially focused on the establishment or expansion of several national programmes delivering training and other organisational development support to local authorities. It also funded a number of 'pilot' projects, many of which involved groups of local authorities. Since 2004, the CBP has also channelled financial resources through 'Improvement Partnerships'; groups of local authorities established on a regional, sub-regional or county-wide basis. Improvement Partnerships may also include Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) and other agencies, such as National Parks Authorities (NPAs).

Improvement Partnerships can be formed when a group of local authorities and/or FRAs join forces to plan and manage a joint improvement programme, focusing initially around corporate improvement. The objective of Improvement Partnerships is that they will facilitate partnership working between central and local government, both strategically through the provision of central government funding and, more tactically, through support from Government Offices and Regional Directors of Practice. It is also hoped that Improvement Partnerships will help to align government initiatives affecting local authorities by serving as a regional or sub-regional mechanism for bringing together different strands of support. Finally, Improvement Partnerships are intended to be part of the overall effort to devolve decision making, giving local authorities more of a say over how resources to support improvement are allocated.

2 Methodology

The commentary presented below is based on:

- Analysis of a range of documents made available by the Improvement Partnerships often including the initial bid to the CBP, delivery and project plans and strategies.
- Semi-structured interviews with all relevant stakeholders, identified through negotiations with central points of contact in each of the Improvement Partnerships. These frequently included project leads, representatives of partner authorities, representatives of Communities and Local Government, Audit Commission and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA).
- Where possible, group discussions were held with the project teams and partner representatives.

All interviews were conducted against a topic guide agreed with the relevant research and policy teams at Communities and Local Government (appendix 2). Interviews were taped and summaries were written up. Throughout, steps have been taken to protect the anonymity of individual respondents.

The discussion presented here is intended to form a baseline. All fieldwork was undertaken between November and December 2005. It is intended that the fieldwork in Improvement Partnerships will be repeated at the same time in 2006 to gain a fuller understanding of the change facilitated by them.

Together, the two phases of the fieldwork is intended to answer the following key research questions:

- What are the range of activities being undertaken by the improvement partnerships?
- How does the Improvement Partnership approach add value to capacity building activities?
- How does the Improvement Partnership approach generate cost and resource savings which can be reinvested in frontline delivery and can these be quantified?
- How does the Improvement partnership approach generate increased quality of local government in terms of leadership, service delivery and responding to local needs?
- What are the key barriers and opportunities to the success of the Improvement Partnership approach?

Fieldwork was undertaken in the following seven Improvement Partnerships:

- The Devon Improvement Programme.
- The Leicestershire and Rutland Improvement Partnership.
- The West Midlands Improvement Partnership.

- The North West Improvement Network.
- The Improvement Partnership for North East Local Government.
- The London Regional Improvement Partnership.
- The Kent-Swindon Local Government Financing Model.

3 Findings

3.1 The concept of 'capacity' and 'capacity building'

Whilst respondents offered no single definition of 'capacity' or 'capacity building' a number of common themes did emerge. These tended to focus around the corporate core of local authorities. Typically, the operative definitions in use included two dimensions:

Resources: particularly the numbers and skills or competencies of staff.

Systems: particularly Human Resources (HR), finance and performance management systems.

3.1.1 Resources

The types of specific staff competencies stressed at an individual level were the understanding and the ability of staff to construct and then use performance management systems, project management and leadership. There was also an emphasis on the increased importance of communication competencies. This was manifest both individually, especially at a leadership level, and organisationally in the capacity of councils to engage, consult and communicate with the public, service users and partner organisations. Indeed, in one case study, a clear distinction was made between internal and external collaborative or partnership capacity. This referred to the internal corporate capacity to pursue the aims and objectives of the organisation on the one hand and the capacity to engage with other external organisations to pursue shared aims and objectives on the other.

3.1.2 Systems

In several case studies, the twin issues of efficiency and effectiveness were prominent in discussions about the concept of capacity and capacity building, with a typical definition being that building capacity was about being able to "do more with less". Capacity was also related to organisational flexibility and the ability to both respond to change and take control of the change process, moving from a reactive focus to being more proactive in shaping the external environment. The flexibility dimension to capacity was strongly linked in many of the case studies to the importance of organisational culture, openness to change and new, often external, ideas about what to do and how to do it. Interestingly, while service delivery was often mentioned, it was generally seen as less prominent than capacity building in relation to corporate functions such as performance management, human resources, finance and planning.

3.2 Factors shaping capacity needs

Respondents involved in the Improvement Partnerships identified a large number of both specific local and general factors which were influencing their current and future capacity building needs.

3.2.1 Performance management

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) had been universally used to a greater or lesser extent to identify councils' capacity building needs, though Best Value and the history of sectoral performance management were also identified as helping to understand these needs over a period of time. Indeed, respondents in some of the case studies remarked on how CPA simply confirmed what they already knew in terms of capacity building needs. However, a number of respondents suggested that CPA created capacity building needs in relation to 'playing the CPA game' rather than addressing the needs of the organisation. Regional representatives of central bodies such as the Audit Commission, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and Communities and Local Government's Regional Directors of Practice tended to be important in identifying common weaknesses arising from CPA reports because of their wider remit. These individuals acted as catalysts for, or facilitated discussions about, common challenges which were subsequently used as the rationale for the IP. After using CPA to identify these needs, most IPs had undertaken extensive discussions and consultation with partners, with several going to great effort to ensure that this process was inclusive. Clearly then Improvement Partnerships can help authorities respond to the challenges posed by CPA. However, the potential benefits from such activities are potentially more wide-ranging than this and it is important that these are recognised to avoid Improvement Partnerships being seen as purely CPA-related.

3.2.2 Central government initiatives

Picking up on a theme that was present in both the initial research which shaped the CBP (OPM, 2003) and the scoping phase of this evaluation, implementation of central government initiatives more broadly was also raised as a key factor shaping capacity building needs, both in the past and in the near future. These included both CPA and the Gershon review but also wider policy initiatives in the service areas covered by local government, with social care and the reorganisation of children's services being mentioned in more than one case study. These were seen as areas where central government policy was likely to create capacity building needs now and in the near future in relation to training and organisational restructuring. The increased pressure from central government to work in partnership with other agencies, for instance through the Local Area Agreement (LAA) process and the introduction of children's trusts, also creates capacity building needs,. This is likely to place increasing emphasis on the external collaborative aspect of capacity, mentioned above. As such, Improvement Partnerships may have potential benefits in relation to responding to these

types of capacity challenges as a result of the focus on partnership, joint working and shared learning that they bring.

3.2.3 Future plans for the reorganisation of local government

There was widespread concern that the Lyons Review of local government may also create additional capacity building needs. Related to this, especially where case studies involved two and three-tier structures (including Town and Parish Councils), there was additional concern about the implications of potential local government re-organisation in the future. However, uncertainty about the precise nature of the changes that might result meant that respondents were unable to clearly define the nature of the capacity building needs that might arise.

3.2.4 The efficiency agenda

Respondents also identified the efficiency agenda as driving their current future capacity building needs. In particular, these were increasing the need to demonstrate efficiency improvements from the considerable investment many authorities have made in recent years in their corporate structures. Authorities expected challenging financial settlements in the near future to constrain their ability to maintain such high levels of investment. Decisions over cost savings and the allocation of resources are likely to be taken in the context of internal political pressure to maintain service-related spending.

3.2.5 Regeneration initiatives

In the North East and West Midlands regeneration initiatives were also highlighted as a potential future driver of capacity building needs, particularly in relation to the emerging agenda around City Regions and the Northern Way. In the North East, the added dimension of the 'no vote' in the recent referendum on elected regional government was present, with the need to bridge a perceived 'democratic deficit' being highlighted. Indeed at both regional and city-regional level, as current developments proceed, the role of local authorities in securing accountability is likely to be ever more crucial.

3.2.6 Increasing public expectations

In many of the case studies increasing public expectations about the quality and quantity of public service delivery was raised as creating capacity building needs for local government. For instance, one case study highlighted the important challenge posed by the need to provide technology-enabled access to services at the same time as maintaining their inclusiveness.

"It's about having the capacity to make the most of new technologies and ways of working but also recognising that for some customers they will always want a telephone or to talk to someone face to face….there are some core public services that need human contact."

(Senior Officer, Leicestershire and Rutland Partnership)

3.2.7 Recruitment, retention and staffing

Interestingly, given that it was a major feature at the time of the initial OPM (2003) research into the capacity building needs of local government, recruitment and retention issues were only raised in one of the case studies as a factor shaping their needs. In several case studies it was reported that engaging with Improvement Partnerships required a level of existing capacity, to be able to recognise a need or to release staff to undertake training or develop new projects. Coping with these challenges was an emerging issue for Improvement Partnerships and their success overall will in part be determined by how these are dealt with. As such it will be an important theme in the second stage of the research.

4 The Improvement Partnerships

This section of the report identifies issues to do with the establishment of Improvement Partnerships, governance and delivery mechanisms.

4.1 Establishing the partnerships: enablers and challenges

4.1.1 Enablers

A number of issues emerged from discussions in the case studies about the process of establishing the partnerships. First among these was the importance of building on existing linkages and partnerships in enabling the rapid formation of the partnership to underlie the bid. For instance, several of the IPs are based loosely around existing partnerships or are developments of them. The Devon Improvement Programme (DIP) grew out of several existing county-wide partnership forums. In the North East and the West Midlands, the IPs emerged from earlier CBP-funded pilot projects and existing regional networks of local authorities. In the North West, the regional collaboration emerged from several sub-regional collaborative efforts, principally around the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) in Greater Manchester and on a county basis in Cumbria where collaboration had already been facilitated by the CBP in a pilot programme.

These existing partnerships and structures were important in facilitating further partnership working for several reasons. First, personal networks, contacts, bonds of trust and understanding between individuals and thus between organisations were already in place. Second, the actual organisational infrastructure was established, meaning that existing meeting schedules could be used to discuss the potential for the bid or, later, to develop it. Third, there was some degree of shared understanding of what the collective needs for improvement and capacity building were, meaning that a further element of preparation was already in place. While these may appear to be relatively insignificant, their existence meant that a lot of the 'groundwork', that would otherwise have to be laid, was already in place. This meant that the partnerships were much easier to form. Establishing an IP where these foundations are not in place is thus a much more challenging and time consuming task.

4.1.2 Challenges

Several of the IPs reported that they had experienced challenges in developing their proposal to central government. Despite the support that was offered by Regional Directors of Practice, Government Offices and the IDeA (all of which was thought to be helpful) they reported that the processes of submitting the bid and of its assessment at times lacked clarity.

The criteria for awarding funding were also thought to be opaque. In one Improvement Partnership these factors were associated with ongoing challenges as a consequence of the lost momentum. In particular, delays had resulted in a loss of commitment among representatives of some of the authorities involved and some authorities' capacity building needs had changed in the intervening period. However, in another Improvement Partnership while there was frustration at the lack of clarity, there was also a sense that as a result of this the ultimate shape of the IP was probably more structured to meet regional needs than might otherwise have been the case. There was some evidence that the challenges encountered with a lack of clarity over what was needed in the bidding process had improved over time, with more recently established Improvement Partnerships reporting less challenges than the early ones. In nearly all cases, some support from national bodies operating at a regional level (such as the Audit Commission, the IDeA or the ODPM) had been important in shaping the bid.

There is a need to ensure that Improvement Partnerships are developed in such a way as to facilitate the increased autonomy of local authorities to shape and take responsibility for their own improvement and capacity building activities. Improvement Partnerships should not be seen as a box ticking exercise. The involvement of IDeA, Regional Directors of Practice and Government Office, as representatives of central government, at an early stage of development can help to ensure that authorities bidding to establish an Improvement Partnership are clear at the outset what the process will be and therefore to overcome some of the challenges raised above.

Kent-Swindon partnership was notably different from the others in its development but found similar challenges in the need to build organisational links between the two organisations. The initial idea for a Local Government Franchising (LGF) model was proposed by Kent County Council and subsequently developed with funding from the CBP. After agreeing to pay Kent CC to deliver support for its social services Directorate through this model, Swindon BC also gained some support from CBP to help fund the £3.6m charge. The wording of the grant determination letter accompanying Kent's allocation of resources from the CBP made clear that it was to support capacity building in the sector as a whole and that once the LGF model was operational it was to be implemented with a failing authority, with the emphasis being that the funding was not to be to the benefit of Kent CC, an already Excellent authority. Respondents in both Kent and Swindon suggested that a large amount of activity had to be put in place to build trust between the two organisations at the beginning, echoing the findings from the other IP case studies.

4.2 Governance structures

No typical set of governance structures is in operation. In the West Midlands, the boards of the IP and the Regional Centre for Excellence have been merged, with the addition of several local authority chief executives added to ensure representation geographically and of different tiers of local

government. Underneath this is a strategic coordinating group made up of regional arms of national bodies like the Audit Commission and the IDeA alongside the West Midlands Local Government Association. The first meeting of this group was held during the duration of the fieldwork. The partnership has agreed to appoint a Regional Programme Development Manager in the near future.

In Devon, the DIP has a Programme Board made up of Chief Executives from each of the partners sitting above a Steering Group which includes seven representative Chief Executives in addition to the Programme Team and a representative of the ODPM. There is also a full time Programme Team including a Programme Manager and two additional staff. In addition, each project has a project team with a lead official from one of the partner authorities.

4.3 Improvement Partnership capacity building activities

There are two main ways in which the Improvement Partnerships are using Capacity Building funds to support improvement activities. The first was through setting out a clearly budgeted programme of activity at the outset. The second was through establishing a centrally administered funding pot and a series of criteria which would dictate funding priorities, for instance against a number of prescribed themes such as middle manager development or strategic planning. Partner authorities would then be encouraged to make a bid, independently or in partnership, for funding to support a specific proposal.

In some authorities, a mixture of these two approaches had been adopted. For example, in Devon, the majority of funding was allocated to a series of costed themed programmes. However, a smaller pot of money had been established as a Good Initiatives Fund which authorities can bid to in partnership in order to fund innovative projects.

A range of different activities are being undertaken within Improvement Partnerships. However, as the research undertaken thus far was at the baseline stage and many Partnerships were only just established, full details of activities that will be undertaken were not available in all case studies. Where this information was available these activities largely mirrored those being supported through other elements of the Capacity Building Programme and in places the National Programme Providers were involved. These include:

- **Training and development of elected members** – for instance, in London this work is being taken forward in combination with the Centre for Public Scrutiny, academic institutions and external consultants. Cross-borough scrutiny events are being organised, focusing on shared learning in areas like Health Impact Assessment, external scrutiny reviews and engagement with external and arms length bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships and Housing Arms Length Management Organisations. The London partnership is also participating in the IDeA's Peer Review programme and developing training programmes for elected members. Member development including the establishment of member competency frameworks, training and development also forms part of the activities in Devon, the West Midlands and will be part of the activities developed in Leicestershire and Rutland, the North East and North West Improvement Partnerships. While the details of this activity had yet to be formally established in many of the IPs, the work in Devon included participation on the IDeA's Leadership Academy. In the West Midlands, work was being targeted at increasing members' understanding of performance management and community leadership as well as increasing the skills, capacity and confidence in relation to the recruitment of senior staff.
- **Training and development of senior staff** – for instance, in Leicestershire and Rutland work has been undertaken to establish more effective working between Chief Executives. The partnership between Kent County Council and Swindon Borough Council may have partially resulted in the appointment of two senior staff (Chief Executive and Director of Social Services) who previously worked at Kent, though this was not an intended outcome. In London, the Association of London Government Improvement Partnership[2] is facilitating a joint project between six authorities to further develop the existing Policy Officer Network (consisting of Assistant Chief Executives and Heads of Service) which is designed to support senior staff through shared learning, the provision of guidance, problem solving. It is also intended to motivate joint project development. The Improvement Partnership has supported the development of an online forum, action learning sets and other opportunities for shared learning, project development and individual development. Work in the North East Improvement Partnership also aims to develop the capacity of 'top teams'.
- **Training and development of middle managers** – for instance, in the North East work will focus on middle managers to enhance project and change management capacity. The partnership between Kent and Swindon has involved Kent providing staff to work alongside and mentor Swindon staff at middle management level. In Leicestershire and Rutland, the Improvement Partnership is also working on a middle manager competency framework. Training and development of middle managers also features across most Improvement Partnerships, even where there is no dedicated work theme devoted to them. However, there was less evidence of linkages with the OPM, Deloittes and Ashridge Future Leadership Programme than might have been expected.

2 This not the only or even the main IP in London. A much larger Capital Ambition project is also being developed.

- **Support for partnerships development**, including between the partners by facilitating or organising partnership events. The very nature of Improvement Partnerships means that they all focus to some extent on partnership development. However, this is also a dedicated work stream in many of the Partnerships. For instance, in Devon work is underway to identify and share good practice in developing partnerships as well as supporting joint work between partner authorities across a range of areas including performance and project management, consultation, strategic planning and workforce development. Some of this work has reviewed the effectiveness of Local Strategic Partnerships in the county. In Leicestershire and Rutland, initial work has focused on identifying and addressing areas of common concern through joint working.
- **Support for organisational development diagnostic activities** – many of the IPs are developing diagnostic work on organisational development, often through support from external consultants. In Devon, work on both strategic planning and project and performance management has included initial diagnostic support from the Audit Commission and IDeA. In the North West a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the development of individual authority Learning Plans, which identify the specific requirements of each authority with a view to developing a number of projects to address these, such as procuring places on National Programmes. These have subsequently been aggregated to produce sub-regional and regional learning plans, focusing on common themes. Of course, identifying needs also formed at least part of the initial bidding process and where Improvement Partnerships have established funds for partners to make proposals to, the bidding process will again require some diagnostic activity to provide evidence of the need for specific project development.
- **Support for the development and improvement of internal management systems and processes**, particularly around strategic planning, performance and project management and HR tools such as competency frameworks and assessment systems. In Devon, one project focuses on strategic planning and visioning while a second focuses on project and performance management. IDeA had supported some of this activity. In London, performance management also features as part of the human resources investment plan, alongside a variety of other HR system related areas. Performance management also features in the Kent and Swindon partnership, and is a common theme of the learning plans established in the North West.
- **Support for developing communication and consultation capacities** – in Devon, several projects have been undertaken to improve communication and consultation. Communication is also a work theme in Leicestershire and Rutland and the North East.
- In Kent and Swindon, activity has also been targeted at the development of **a model to facilitate inter-authority support** with supporting organisational infrastructure.

- The London Improvement Partnership is also developing several projects aimed at addressing **recruitment and retention** challenges. For instance, an internet-based portal to market local authority employment is being developed, with a particular emphasis on increasing the recruitment of under-represented groups.

4.4 Mechanisms for delivering improvement activities

A number of different mechanisms were supporting the capacity building activities:

- **Use of existing national programmes** such as those initially funded by the CBP and including regional and local variations of these programmes. For instance, in Devon authorities had been provided with a small number of subsidised places on national programmes run by the IDeA. In the North East, discussions had begun with providers of some of the national programmes about how they could be adapted to meet the specific needs of North East councils. It is envisaged that the development of learning plans in the North West will lead to procuring access to national programmes, where this is required by individual local authorities. Diagnostic and development activities had already had substantial input from the IDeA and also the North West Employers Organisation. The London Partnership was making use of the IDeA's 'peer review' programme. In Devon, places had been secured for both officers and members on IDeA programmes and the IDeA had been used for diagnostic support. The Leicestershire Partnership was also planning to offer subsidies for places on the IDeA Leadership Academy.

While National Programmes are being used as a source of capacity building support, there may be a number of reasons why this is not more extensive. First, in at least one Improvement Partnership, there was concern at the role of the National Programme providers and a clear desire to move toward activities developed within the region to gain the maximum possible impact from the funding. Second, there was some evidence of a lack of awareness of some of the National Programmes, with those being run by the IDeA being the most commonly known. Third, at the time of the fieldwork, a number of the Improvement Partnerships were in an early stage of development and as such were not always clear on exactly how their activities were going to be provided. In at least one of these more recent Partnerships, discussions were underway with both the IDeA and OPM about the potential role that their programmes could play. It may therefore be that in stage two of the fieldwork more IPs will be using National Programmes. However, part of the rationale for the development of Improvement Partnerships is that the sector takes control of its own improvement activities. As such, it may also be the case that some IPs refer to develop their own tailored solutions.

- Buying in of **external consultancy support**. In a number of cases, projects have been developed with the help of external consultants. Consultants have frequently been appointed to support work on project and performance management. For instance, in Devon the IDeA and Audit Commission have been commissioned to provide consultancy support in the development of work on strategic planning and visioning and performance management. In the North East, there were plans to commission several individual consultants. In the North West, there were plans to commission support from the external consultants with the partnership with the University of Manchester acting as one possible channel for this.
- The **development of new tools and programmes**. For instance, many of the Partnerships weren't simply adopting externally developed competency frameworks such as the IDeA's member development framework, but were developing their own. Work in Devon and Leicestershire and Rutland was underway to develop competency frameworks for both members and officers. There is also some activity to develop new training programmes in alignment with these competency frameworks. The main reason for not simply adopting pre-existing examples appeared to relate to the need to develop competency frameworks to suit the specific circumstances and demands of individual organisations. Indeed, this need for specificity also meant that developing frameworks across authorities was at times seen as problematic. Where competency frameworks were being developed, those already produced by organisations like the IDeA (and also other local authorities) were actively considered and were drawn on in the development of more tailored examples.
- **Joint project development** by officers from the partner authorities, for instance in consultation or developing local performance indicators. In Devon, a large part of the delivery of the strategy is via six projects, each of which is being developed by project teams staffed by officers from the partner authorities. This had led to the development of joint consultation procedures, joint work on Best Value User Satisfaction surveys and a small Good Initiatives Fund being established to facilitate jointly developed projects.
- **Establishing local/regional infrastructure** and other sources of support for the existing and future capacity building needs of partners. The Devon Improvement Programme has established a web-based Learning and Improvement Portal to provide information about the development of improvement projects, opportunities for shared learning and e-learning activities. The Devon Improvement Programme has also established a Provider Pool made up of approved consultants commissioned to a Framework Contract. In the North West, part of the plan for the North West Improvement Network is to establish a Centre for Local Governance at the University of Manchester.
- Underlying all these activities and mechanisms for delivering them was a commonly mentioned objective of achieving change in organisational culture.

The discussion above suggests that there are three additional broad research questions for further investigation in the second phase of the case study research. These are:

- Which method of administering funding is the most appropriate: the fully costed and planned programme, or the more flexible 'bidding fund' approach, and why?
- Which types of capacity building activity are having an impact, how and why?
- Which types of method of delivering that activity are having the most positive impact, how and why?

By investigating these three broad research questions in phase two of the research, we hope to address the issue of 'what works, in what circumstances, for who and why', in addition to attempting to identify what doesn't work.

4.5 Early impacts of Improvement Partnerships

This is a baseline study, and in most cases the IPs were only in the early stages of implementation. They were thus unable yet to offer any detailed evidence of impacts. However, some early impacts were apparent:

- **There was a widely reported increase in the depth and scope of partnership working as a result of engagement with the Improvement Partnership.** This had expanded from just being at senior level or contained within specific groups and teams to having a wider significance in the authorities, with an increasing number of staff and teams in the authorities being engaged in such activity. Partnerships had also expanded in scope from being sub-regional to regional, or to including other bodies such as Fire Authorities or National Parks Authorities. When widening in scope, however, there were challenges in maintaining the depth and quality of existing partnerships.
- **There was evidence in some longer running partnerships that changes were beginning in the organisational culture of some partners.** This was particularly present in the partnership between Kent and Swindon and in some of the partners in the Devon Improvement Programme. In the main the types of change noted were towards a more open and outwardly oriented culture, moving away from insularity.
- **There was some evidence of Improvement Partnerships stimulating shared learning**, especially in Devon and Kent/Swindon. For instance, in Devon, district councils were able to take advantage of the two Unitary authorities' experiences of the revised CPA methodology. Also in Devon, the Partnership has established an internet-based 'learning and improvement' portal to facilitate shared learning. In several Improvement Partnerships it was apparent that authorities rated as 'Poor' or 'Weak' in CPA had been able to share areas of their own good practice, with the effect of building confidence and morale in those authorities.

- **Improvement Partnerships may be able to generate efficiency savings now and in the future.** Fieldwork respondents identified a variety of different ways that Improvement Partnerships might help to generate efficiency savings. These included efficiency gains from improved corporate systems and processes, joint project development and service provision, more efficient procurement and selection of improvement activities in the future as a result of shared learning and improved access to local information on what support is available and more efficient procurement of external support arising from economies of scale generated by collaboration. Though it was felt generally that it would be challenging to quantify these savings, there was some hope that indicative estimates might be possible in the future. It was also suggested that Improvement Partnerships may result in more improvement activity than might have otherwise been possible, but without actually generating savings. As such, it was widely felt that Improvement Partnerships were cost effective, even if it doesn't prove possible to prove that there have been cost savings.

Where it wasn't yet possible to identify impacts because of the early stage of development of the Partnerships, there was some discussion of what respondents thought the impacts might be. Generally, these discussions stressed the goal of overall improvement, changes in organisational culture to more open and outwardly oriented approaches focused on being able to meet the challenges posed to local authorities in the near future. Respondents also hoped to be able to enhance the quality and effectiveness of existing partnerships with the potential for exploring joint project development in the future.

4.6 The future of support to low performing authorities

Part of the logic of Improvement Partnerships is that they enable councils to take more responsibility for their own capacity building and improvement needs. It is therefore envisaged centrally that Improvement Partnerships will increasingly assume the role of providing support to councils defined as under-performing.

The case study research thus included a discussion of their views on this in the light of their experiences so far. These discussions included several respondents in Poor or Weak authorities who had been responsible for coordinating projects enabled by Direct Support from the CBP. No fixed position emerged from these discussions. In some case studies the transition of responsibility for this sort of support to Improvement Partnerships was viewed positively and respondents reported that peer support and pressure in this regard would be a useful lever for improvement activities. However, there were also some significant concerns raised about this prospect:

Some expressed concern that Poor and Weak partners be given additional support through Improvement Partnerships when they had already been given CBP-funded support through other channels. This created some

degree of tension, detracted from otherwise good partnership working and had the potential to act as a substantial barrier to delivering focused support to poorly performing authorities.

There were concerns expressed by several respondents that Poor and Weak authorities have specific and intense needs which mean that they were not sufficiently able to shape Improvement Partnership activities or that they cannot effectively engage with them to get the best out of them. Others were equally concerned that engagement with Improvement Partnerships was a distraction from the need to focus intensively on the improvement activities within the individual organisation. While these issues were often part of the discussions in the lead up to the establishment of Improvement Partnerships in some cases more work needed to be done to resolve the issues.

Part of what makes an authority Poor or Weak is often a culture of insularity, a failure to recognise the need for change or barriers between levels of the organisation meaning that it is challenging for external partnerships to have deeper connections within the organisation. Collectively these challenges mean that there are additional barriers to these organisations realising the potential benefits of Improvement Partnerships.

Improvement Partnerships are in the early stages of development. It is not yet clear that they will be successful in implementing their projects and securing improvement, though there are encouraging signs. In this context, there were some concerns that Improvement Partnerships themselves currently lack the capacity to take responsibility for poor performance.

Finally, there were concerns that tackling poor performance would disrupt individual working relationships with some in poorly performing authorities being resentful, hampering the broader development of partnership working.

Where these concerns were raised, it was not yet clear that the sufficient steps had been taken to overcome them. However, discussions were underway as to how to resolve them. There may be scope to address these concerns: first in the way that central funding is allocated to the Improvement Partnerships, and second in the way that this is then cascaded to local authorities themselves. By learning from the insights of game theory – explain, there may be scope to structure financial support so that side payments can be made to better performing partners to support improvement in poorly performing partners. Game theory identifies the need to establish incentives to ensure that different actors in any given context will cooperate at junctures when they might otherwise simply seek to maximise their own self interest undermining efforts to realise the longer-term benefits of partnership and cooperation.

These findings indicate that Capacity Building funding will need to acknowledge the increased challenges faced by poorly performing or recovering authorities in engaging in partnership activity. As such, thought might be given to how the allocation of funding might work to provide these authorities with enhanced incentives to participate. This would have the additional benefits of ensuring that these authorities are able to release staff time to engage actively and effectively in shaping the development of Improvement Partnerships to ensure that the Partnerships reflect their needs.

4.7 Benefits and challenges of Improvement Partnerships

Respondents in all the case studies reported important benefits from Improvement Partnerships. These included:

- **Economies of scale** in purchasing access to improvement support and in developing new projects and initiatives.
- **Potential for cost savings and efficiency gains** especially as arising from joint project development and joint service provision.
- **Shared learning**, though there were concerns about whether the most appropriate source of learning was always from partner organisations. Peer mentoring and support was one such source of shared learning.
- **Partnership working** and the spill-over effect of joint working which facilitates further cooperation in the future, with the potential to develop joint service provision. For instance, in Devon some potential for joint service provision in relation to customer services was identified.
- **More strategic alignment** for the benefit of local communities, for instance in aligning consultation activity in two-tier areas to avoid consulting on the same issues.
- **Peer pressure in support of improvement** activities may help to generate and sustain commitment to change.
- **Potential to secure external support while retaining sectoral capacity** rather than simply relying on external consultants. In one partnership, the potential to secure external support that was not connected to commercial imperatives was described as 'refreshing'.

Against this, a number of challenges were also highlighted:

- Partnership working can be challenging where **distances between the partners are large or transport links are poor**.
- Challenges can emerge from **conflicting political control** in partner organisations or from **tensions between county and district tiers**.
- **Releasing staff time for partnership working** can be challenging, especially for Poor or Weak authorities or those in a challenging financial context.
- **Maintaining the commitment of partners** can be challenging, especially when time delays occur or where benefits are not directly linked to each partner's needs.

- **Different 'starting points'** can make partnership working on improvement challenging. For instance, there are challenges for authorities with different CPA ratings and with different improvement needs. This may mean that joint work tends toward a 'lowest common denominator' level leaving some partners with little to gain. While discussions at the outset might find agreement that all authorities require additional support for performance management, for instance, detailed discussions at the delivery stage over the precise content of that support can frequently be the point at which divergent needs emerge.
- It can be difficult to get **the right level of commitment** from partner organisations, particularly in releasing the right amount and level of seniority in staff time. Again, while this should be agreed at the outset, retaining the commitment, especially of senior staff, is often a challenge.

4.8 Lessons for other Improvement Partnerships

There were also some common lessons learnt in the development of Improvement Partnerships. These included:

- There is a need to ensure that **emerging Partnerships fully understand the process for gaining access to CBP support** and that the criteria and timescales involved are transparently communicated.
- It is essential that authorities seek the **early involvement, advice and guidance of the Local Government Association, the Government Office, Regional Director of Practice and IDeA** at both regional and national level as part of the process of shaping and developing their approach to forming an Improvement Partnership.
- There is a need to identify and pursue **quick wins** to secure and maintain the commitment of all partners.
- It is important to both **be realistic about the time scale** involved in approving bids for support and to **avoid delays once approval has been given** by undertaking thorough planning prior to submitting the bid.
- There is a need to **maintain communication** to all partners, consistently and effectively restating the aims of the project and how projects will contribute to the achievement of these. **Communication should be a two-way process** to ensure that partners' views are taken on board as the IP develops.
- There is a need to ensure that **the aims of the overall project are closely linked to the specific needs of each partner**, and that all partners understand how they are linked. Thought should be given, for instance, to how individual development will be translated into organisational development.
- There is a need to **ensure that partners are releasing staff at the right level of their respective organisations** so that decisions can be made and organisational commitment is secured. There is also a need to ensure that authorities and senior staff in the authorities understand that **continued commitment to the Improvement Partnership will be required**.

- There is a need to **find a balance between the commitment gained by having projects run by officers in partner organisations and by the efficiency of establishing a central project team**. Input from Government Office, IDeA regionally and the Regional Directors of Practice can also help support central functions.
- **There are opportunities to share elements of the design of capacity building activities, drawing on work completed as part of the National Programmes and from other Improvement Partnerships**. This is particularly the case in relation to activities around officer and member development, the design of competency frameworks, procurement training and performance management where a large amount of investment has already been made by the National Programme Providers. As Improvement Partnerships move from identifying the broad areas of work that they want to pursue to designing actual improvement projects there is a **need to avoid 're-inventing the wheel'.**

5 Conclusion

Improvement Partnerships clearly have the potential to be an effective mechanism for the delivery of capacity building support to local authorities. There is some evidence that they are already helping to strengthen the working relationship between central government and local authorities, especially through the involvement of representatives of the IDeA at a regional level and the Regional Directors of Practice.

Further developing this link will require that central government broadens the number of funding and capacity building streams that are channelled through Improvement Partnerships. However, there are also clear risks in this strategy. Improvement Partnerships require substantial commitment of time and resources from the partner authorities and will take time to become fully established. It is not yet possible to conclude that they are an effective and cost effective way of delivering capacity building support, though the signs are encouraging. Phase two of the research will address this issue in a much greater detail. Improvement Partnerships are currently funded for a time-limited period and as such there is the potential that the Partnerships may not gain sufficient additional resources, either from central government or from the partner authorities, to make them sustainable over the longer term. Where they are able to be extended the initial costs of establishing the Partnerships will be spread over a longer period of time, making this a much more effective use of resources.

There are also clear reasons to think that the Improvement Partnership approach is more suited to the challenges that local authorities are likely to face in the future. Delivering Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements in particular place an additional emphasis on the need to engage with a wider range of organisations. In strengthening the capacity of authorities to work in partnership, Improvement Partnerships may be well suited to this purpose. They may also be an appropriate vehicle for administering the types of activity that may be needed in response to any changes proposed as a result of the Lyons Review or the recent White Paper on local government.

There was also evidence to support the notion that Improvement Partnerships are effective in allowing local authorities to define and take control of their own improvement needs. However, there are some challenges that need to be overcome in order to fully realise this. First, an appropriate balance needs to be achieved between utilising the benefits of investment already made in designing and providing National Programmes of support, and the need to define and pursue locally defined priorities and needs. Second, the difficulties associated with challenging and addressing poor performance through Improvement Partnerships also need to be overcome.