

Scrutiny Regional Network

Friday 27 January 2012

At the scrutiny regional network held on 27th January 2012 Mark Edgell, Regional Associate for LGA, provided a brief overview around self regulation and the support being provided by the LGA to local councils.

The Local Government Climate

The Localism Act has set a different tone for local government providing communities and individuals with capacity to find local solutions for local problems. Localism strengthens local democracy by putting citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services, and achieving this by shifting the balance of power from Whitehall to localities. From this perspective, the key question will be, Will the Localism Act improve the ability of local people to make decisions about local services and public spending priorities, and will it engage them as citizens within a framework sustained by a strong, responsive council?

This is the climate that LA's find themselves in and the removal of much of the control of central government provides a new challenge for LA's. The LGA has developed 'Taking the lead' which is an offer of support and guidance to council's in developing self regulation models. This document has 3 key principles as follows:

1. Recognising Good Performance Data

How local authorities measure performance and reference was made to LG Inform where data can be both published and accessed by councils.

2. Peer Review & Peer Challenge

An offer from the LGA of a free peer challenge for every council every 3 years was highlighted. ME noted that the peer challenge was essentially a blank piece of paper and it was for local authorities to decide where to focus the challenge.

3. Scrutiny & Challenge by Elected Members

This was highlighted as a key element to a robust approach, with 3 key areas for scrutiny:

- Influence of council spend within the local authority that reflects community priorities;
- Open to improvement and open to constructive challenge; and,
- Open to help other local authorities.

ME went onto to explain that the real challenge was to move away from government control and in making our own rules. This will involve working out

how well we are doing, moving away from compliance and evaluating the impact of decisions.

Questions

When undertaking the peer challenge how can an authority be sure that those coming in and making the challenge are up to it?

It is difficult to offer any guarantee that peer review teams will be better than the authority they are reviewing but we do ensure that they come from a credible organisation. Also the make-up of the review team is a process between the council and the LGA to decide and this takes the shape of a conversation about who is up to the job.

How do you envisage local authorities improving community engagement within self regulation?

It is important for councils to note that the LGA is not advocating the removal of all performance indicators and certainly there is a feeling that councils will want to create their own PI's.

There is no real guidance from the Coalition Government or the LGA, in fact what is being provided is a number of tools to help LA's in undertaking this.

ME concluded that self regulation was very much dependent on the culture of the authority and the mindset of members and officers.