

Thinking about improvement breakthroughs

Which breakthroughs does my council need to work on?

To secure long-term improvement it's important to target attention and effort in the right places now. In *Learning from Comprehensive Performance Assessment of District Councils: Improvement Breakthroughs* we set out eight key breakthrough areas where councils can focus their attention as they seek to achieve continuous improvement. These areas are:

- lead and manage effectively;
- pull together;
- make time to listen and learn;
- look outwards;
- take a long-term view;
- embed performance management and other systems;
- stick with change and improvement; and
- prepare for the future and reach for new heights.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) has shown us that better-performing councils are more likely to be successful in these areas. However, even these councils may still have work to do on the breakthrough areas in order to benefit fully from the increased opportunities for service improvement that can result from them.

Whatever your council's CPA rating, or your view of the progress your council is making, we hope the breakthroughs we have identified will present you with a starting point for discussing areas for improvement action. You might find it helpful to use the questions below to think about:

- (a) whether you've achieved each improvement breakthrough; are working towards it; or are just starting to address it; and
- (b) whether your current improvement plan is helping you make progress in the breakthrough areas where you have most work to do.

Improvement breakthroughs – questions for discussion

Questions for discussion	What progress have you made? Achieved Working towards Just starting	Does your improvement plan address this area? Yes Partially No
Lead and manage effectively <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How clear are the council's vision, priorities and targets – will you know when they've been achieved? 2. Are leaders clearly behind the vision, priorities and targets? 3. Do leaders act for the community as well as the council? 4. Is service delivery being effectively managed in line with the agreed vision and priorities? 		
Pull together <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Is the vision for what will be achieved shared and owned across the council and with partners? 6. Is everyone pulling together to achieve your priorities? (senior managers, middle managers, frontline staff, senior members, backbenchers, key partners) 7. What is the common ground between member groups? Can this be used to help build consensus and cooperation? 		
Make time to listen and learn <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Is listening and learning seen as valuable enough to spend time on? 9. Is learning consistently put into practice? 		

Questions for discussion	What progress have you made? Achieved Working towards Just starting	Does your improvement plan address this area? Yes Partially No
Look outwards 10. What's the balance between internal and external focus? 11. How effectively are partnership opportunities used to help achieve outcomes? 12. Do partnerships offer value for money?		
Take a long-term view 13. How long term is the council's vision? 14. Is this vision translated into clear actions, for which people are held to account?		
Embed performance management and other systems 15. Are systems that drive improvement part of 'the day job'? 16. Is there a 'golden thread' from the vision through to individual and team plans so that everyone knows how they contribute? 17. Do separate systems work effectively together? 18. Are systems continually refined and improved?		
Stick with change and improvement 19. When complex projects are undertaken is there a real determination to stay the course and work at overcoming obstacles?		
Prepare for the future and reach for new heights 20. Are you ready to engage with future policy directions – for example, devolving power to neighbourhoods, local leadership? 21. Are you capitalising on your strengths to be more than the sum of your parts? 22. How focused are you on your users and citizens?		

What should we do now?

Having identified areas where you need to focus attention, the resources highlighted here will help you find out what others have done to make progress on the improvement breakthroughs, and provide useful advice and guidance.

Improvement in District Councils web tool

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/cpa/districts/lfdcpa

This searchable database draws together findings from district council CPA reports, focusing on strengths, weaknesses and breakthroughs for each district. The tool allows you to search data on district council activity in a number of ways, including by the eight improvement breakthroughs detailed in this paper. You can find out which councils were assessed as doing well in areas that relate to the breakthroughs and follow links to further case studies and CPA reports.

Improvement Network website

www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk

This website brings together advice and guidance on organisational improvement from the four Improvement Network partners (Audit Commission, CIPFA, Improvement and Development Agency [IDeA] and the Employers' Organisation). Its resources contain information, ideas and case studies that relate to each of the improvement breakthroughs.

Other councils in your county or region, whether districts or not, may also be tackling these improvement breakthroughs. There is much to gain from working with others to share support and learning. Additional support is available to councils through the **ODPM/LGA Capacity Building Programme**. As part of the programme £57 million has been made available to support councils working together in Regional Improvement Partnerships to address their improvement needs. District councils are also entitled to subsidies on national programmes. Further details are available from the LGA website¹ or from Regional Directors of Practice based in the Government Offices and IDeA Regional Associates.