

Lessons from the NEA Model

The Council and NEAs have been acutely aware, throughout 2019-20, that the NEA approach was a new model being trialled with regard to local government improvement. The Council and NEAs have therefore worked together to capture some headline aspects of feedback in relation to the model and commit to work with MHCLG and the LGA in assisting with shared learning for the benefit of the sector as a whole.

We regard this model as having been successful in Birmingham, with opportunities for application elsewhere. This is contingent, however, on certain pre-conditions being in place to lay the ground for success. Fundamentally, this model will only work where a host Council accepts the need for change, takes collective responsibility for legacy failings and wants to pro-actively improve.

This was the scenario in Birmingham, where both political and officer teams within the Council had publicly outlined the areas for improvement in summer 2018 and spring 2019 and were willing to commit to a mature partnership with NEAs to move the Council forward. This requires a high degree of self-awareness, courage and appreciation of the risk involved for both Council and NEAs alike. It is clear from the recent history these pre-conditions do not exist in every part of the sector nationally, and therefore the NEA approach to improvement would not work as an imposed model or in circumstances where the Council is not willing to countenance transparent exposition of areas for improvement. Similarly, the Council's proactive engagement with external auditors as regular contributors to the 'programme board' meetings alongside NEAs is testament to this forward-thinking approach to 'progressive assurance' in Birmingham.

It is the consensus position of the Council and NEAs that the partnership together has seen the Council come a long way in 2019-20, but we could have done even better with consistency of senior officer leadership and a more formal period of preparation. The creation of this model was forged in a rather fraught and tense negotiation regarding the departure of the previous Independent Improvement Panel and therefore it was not possible to cogently align the intentions of the NEAs with a senior team prior to arrival. Of similar concern was the commencement of the model in July 2019 almost coinciding with the announcement regarding Dawn Baxendale's departure, so an opportunity was lost to genuinely co-design the NEA's strategic input with that of a CEO's agenda for change. In the circumstances a huge amount has been achieved through the commitment of CLT to the NEA model, but if this model is applied in other places, a single CEO shaping the selection of NEA areas of expertise could ensure consistency and creation of a single force for change.

A resoundingly positive aspect of the NEA model in Birmingham has been the political engagement with the NEAs as a group and the concept of external advice into Cabinet. Sessions with the Leader, Deputy Leader and / or Cabinet members are cited by NEAs as the highlights of the year and the Leader was consistently complimented for being open and accessible, listening and engaging in NEA's appraisal of options. A particular example in this regard was the NEA's endorsement of the decision not to initially appoint from the field of CEO candidates, which was regarded as a brave but correct political choice. The NEAs have been delighted to see Cabinet members grow in confidence when given, "space to breath" out of national intervention and the strategic intent of the NEA model is regarded as giving leadership the confidence to lead. In future iterations of this model, NEAs would advise peers acting in an NEA capacity to spend more time with Cabinet and the Council Leadership / Executive team together.

In relation to the Birmingham experience, such processes do require management and support, and both the Council and NEAs would advocate having a dedicated programme

manager in place for any other local authorities adopting the model, with a sponsoring Director or AD taking responsibility for the coordination of the improvement agenda, and flows of information across the organisation with and on behalf of NEAs, in support of the Chief Executive.

In terms of wider reflections for the sector, MHCLG and the LGA it is the consensus position of the Council and NEAs that this model can (and should) certainly form an important part of the range of tools available to drive local authority improvement across the UK. It is clear that the LGA corporate peer review model is entirely appropriate in certain contexts, and the Birmingham journey out of national intervention validates the core improvement themes at the heart of the LGA's peer model. It could be argued, however, that the LGA peer model is not sufficient in the face of the complexities and dynamics of the post-COVID landscape and the sector now needs to draw on a wider range of diagnostic tools, professional perspectives and suites of hard and soft intervention tools to meet the expectations of citizens and Government. As above, the NEA and peer review models would appear to sit alongside tools that are best applied when Councils are willing to commit to transparency. Indeed, it could be argued that the NEA is a form of ongoing peer review, albeit with a wider range of peers that draw from different sectoral disciplines.

In summary, the Birmingham NEA model has been a resounding success for Birmingham. The 'fit' and 'chemistry' between NEAs and the Council has been integral, with less of an emphasis on national assurance and more on the provision of local advice and support in a practical manner, and we will carry forward that ethos into the next stage of the Council's improvement journey. NEAs, Cabinet Members and senior officers in Birmingham alike would be delighted to assist peer councils, the LGA and MHCLG in taking forward similar models elsewhere in the country.