1. Introduction

The 1998 and 2001 Local Government White Papers introduced more than 20 policy initiatives (for example the Best Value Regime or Local Public Service Agreements) to modernise local government, collectively referred to as the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA). Many of these individual policy initiatives are the subjects of large-scale evaluations assessing their progress since introduction. Individually these policy evaluations do not provide a picture of the impact of the LGMA as a whole. To explore the combined impact of policies within the LGMA, ODPM commissioned a meta-evaluation. The meta-evaluation draws together evidence from each of these individual evaluations to identify the policy initiatives which have been key enablers of local government modernisation and highlight synergies and conflicts between individual policies.

The meta-evaluation is reporting on its findings through five over-arching themes:

- Service Improvement;
- Accountability;
- Community Leadership;
- Stakeholder Engagement;
- Public Confidence.

This progress report evaluates the cumulative impact of policies within the LGMA on accountability in local authorities. The report draws evidence from published and unpublished research from individual LGMA evaluations, together with a national survey of local authority officers and case-studies of six local authorities conducted specifically for the meta-evaluation. The full report is available at: weblink

It is important to recognise that at this stage in the development of the LGMA, the conclusions that can be drawn about its impact on accountability are necessarily tentative and preliminary in nature.
2. Accountability within the LGMA context

Improvements in local authority accountability are high on the Government's modernisation agenda. This is reflected in policies on political management and ethical standards, finance, performance, e-government, local democracy and partnership, community leadership and well-being. We have defined accountability in terms of four key dimensions: taking into account, giving an account, holding to account and redress. However, the LGMA operates in a wider local and national context and consequently we identify other factors that may impact upon accountability, either positively or negatively.

3. Changes in local government accountability

There has been some increase in accountability, especially in relation to taking into account and giving an account. The evidence of accountability improvements in relation to holding to account are less clear, with some instances where accountability has not changed or has decreased. There is little evidence of changes to levels of 'redress'.

There are high and increasing levels of engagement with key stakeholder organisations, and this is more pronounced than involvement with the general public. Officers perceive that local authorities are explaining their decisions more effectively to stakeholders, service users and residents than three years ago. However, residents, who report problems in relation to councils' ability to communicate information, particularly in two-tier authorities, do not share this view.

Accountability is now a higher priority for councils than three years ago. The accountability of senior managers has increased to a greater extent than that of elected members and frontline staff. This may be due to their greater exposure to the community as a result of involvement in consultation and partnership working.

There are weaknesses in the accountability of partnerships, but local authorities are taking a lead in ensuring that Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) have enhanced accountability.

4. Policy impacts on local government accountability

ARE ACCOUNTABILITY IMPROVEMENTS DUE TO LGMA POLICIES?

LGMA policies have had a strong positive impact in making local authorities more accountable. Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), Best Value, Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) have had a significant impact, followed by new political management arrangements and Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs). The introduction of New Council Constitutions was mainly seen as a driver for improving the accountability of elected members.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE OTHER MAIN DRIVERS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IMPROVEMENTS?

Leadership by members and officers has been a particularly important internal driver for accountability improvements. This is particularly the case where councils had a pre-disposition to the LGMA policies in this area. Demands from residents were identified as a key external driver by officers, possibly arising from the greater use of consultation and 'taking into account' mechanisms.
DO ELEMENTS OF THE LGMA HINDER ACCOUNTABILITY IMPROVEMENTS?

Most of the LGMA policies have contributed to increased accountability but several policies have also introduced some limitations on improvements in local government accountability. In some cases these are due to transitional problems of moving from one system to another (as in the creation of effective scrutiny of the executive or in grappling with the potential contribution of e-government). In other cases, they are due to the more complex institutional arrangements that LGMA policies have created, for example in relation to LSPs and postal voting.

There are three main accountability limitations. One is the tension between the gains from partnership working (especially in terms of service improvement and stakeholder involvement), and the weaker accountability arrangements it brings. The second is the relationship between managerial and political accountability, especially where managers are now operating more in areas that were traditionally seen as the preserve of politicians. The third limitation is between contracting out and accountability, where there may be gains due to clearer specification and monitoring but also limitations due to arm’s length provision.

DO LGMA POLICIES HAVE DIFFERENT ACCOUNTABILITY IMPACTS IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF COUNCIL?

The LGMA has had a varied impact, even though an identical (or very similar) set of policies is being implemented by all local authorities, because each operates within a unique historical, political and organisational context. For example, officers working in London and Metropolitan Boroughs are more likely than officers in District and Unitary Councils to report that accountability is now a higher priority than it was three years ago. Improved accountability has long been a high priority for officers working in excellent, weak and poor councils, whilst officers in weak or poor authorities are more likely to agree strongly that accountability is now a higher priority than it was three years ago. This could be explained by the fact that these authorities have experienced more contact and engagement with central government over the last three years.

DO LGMA POLICIES ON ACCOUNTABILITY REINFORCE EACH OTHER?

There are complementarities between policies on new political arrangements (especially regarding visibility of decision-makers), elections and e-democracy, and public participation, although there are also some limitations here in respect of scrutiny processes that are not well developed and where public participation is limited. The main inconsistencies arise in relation to the balance between central and local accountability and the introduction of partnerships that confuse the already complex lines of accountability within a local authority. A further key conflict concerns the tension between traditional representative forms of accountability and more deliberative forms, such as duties to engage and consult with the public.

5. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

The evidence suggests that there have been improvements in accountability since the introduction of the LGMA. However, it should be noted that there are also a number of areas where there is mixed evidence or no change. The LGMA policies which have had most effect are not those with the strongest direct focus on accountability – for example, whilst new political management arrangements, Community Strategies and LSPs are all seen as key drivers of accountability by at least two thirds of local authority officers, the policies cited most
frequently (by four-fifths of respondents) are CPA and Best Value, which focus more on accountability to central government rather than local stakeholders. There is limited evidence that improvements in accountability have promoted increases in public confidence in councils.

Implications for central government

**NEIGHBOURHOOD GOVERNANCE**

Proposals on neighbourhood arrangements offer new mechanisms through which the four aspects of accountability could be enhanced. They also have the potential to increase accountability of non-local government agencies delivering local public services, especially through a focus on accountability for outputs. Our research highlights the need to be conscious of the way in which these arrangements will increase the complexity of local government accountability, especially if new agencies are created to deliver elements of local government's remit.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND PERFORMANCE**

There is a need to be conscious of the impact of centrally determined performance frameworks on the way in which local authorities understand their primary accountability relationships. CPA gives a much sharper judgement on a council’s performance than the electoral process, and with potentially greater impact (in relation to intervention or freedoms).

**ACCOUNTABILITY TRADE-OFFS**

There is a need for local and central government to understand the interactions between different policy initiatives in terms of cumulative changes to local government accountability. There may be trade-offs to be made between strategies that improve outcomes for citizens and communities and those that enhance accountability. These trade-offs can be resolved by designing ‘good enough’ governance arrangements, in terms of the purpose and responsibility of the initiative in question.

Implications for local authorities:

**LOCAL LEADERSHIP**

Leadership by members and officers emerged as a key internal factor in driving accountability improvements. There may be opportunities for local leadership to address elements of the accountability framework where we have been unable to identify significant change.

**CONSULTING WITH RESIDENTS**

Local councils are increasingly taking the views of residents and stakeholders into account through numerous consultation and participation exercises. This research suggests that, overall, residents are reasonably happy to participate in such exercises. However, participants are not always informed about the outcome of consultations which may diminish their enthusiasm for taking part in the future.

**COMMUNICATING WITH RESIDENTS**

Evidence from this and other research indicates that local authorities have been producing more information on their policies and actions than ever before. However, residents do not share this view. This suggests councils might need to give further thought to the way in which they communicate with the public and the accessibility of the information they currently provide.
Implications for stakeholders:

**IMPROVING THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF PARTNERSHIPS**

This and other research demonstrates that there are weaknesses associated with the accountability of partnerships. However, there is evidence that local councils have taken a lead in developing and enhancing the accountability of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Local authority partners and stakeholders might consider how they could best contribute to improved accountability arrangements for partnerships.

**Implications for residents:**

**HOLDING COUNCILS TO ACCOUNT**

The research indicates that there has been an increase in accountability in relation to ‘taking into account’ and ‘giving an account’ but there is less evidence of accountability improving in relation to ‘holding to account’. The evidence also suggests that demands from residents are a key external driver for accountability improvements. Residents should be encouraged to use the increasing amount of information provided by their council, along with that on the councils’ performance from central government, to hold their local authorities to account more effectively.

Further information

Copies of this summary and previous reports from the study are available on at the ODPM website:

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/odpm_index.hcst?n=5902&l=3

or at the website for the meta-evaluation research:

http://www.clrgr.cf.ac.uk/lgma/

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