

## Understanding RIEPs: Towards the delivery of more effective and efficient public services?

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### Introduction

Created in April 2008, the nine Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) are a significant facet of the government's drive to promote efficiency and excellence in public services. According to the Improvement and Development Agency, they are set to play "an exciting and vital role in the new support arrangements for councils"<sup>1</sup>. RIEPs are an amalgamation of two organisations: Improvement Partnerships, which were created voluntarily by local authorities and sought to share learning and good practice; and Regional Centres of Excellence, which have been instrumental in supporting councils to achieve far reaching efficiency savings over the previous spending review period. According to the Improvement and Development Agency<sup>2</sup>, the aim of RIEPs is to:

"Harness the expertise of councils to add new capacity to local government in order to accelerate the drive for greater improvement efficiency".

Put simply, RIEPs have been designed to "help councils deliver the ambitious outcomes, set through local area agreements (LAAs), by supporting them in their efforts to become more efficient, innovative and engaged with citizens" (ibid). A RIEP is led by a network of councillors who are advised by a group drawn from council chief executives, partners and representatives from organisations within the region. In addition, a small team of RIEP staff, located in a host body such as a council or regional organisation, support the partnership.

RIEPs can be seen as the latest initiative that aims to promote public sector efficiency, and can perhaps best be understood within the broader context of efficiency and modernisation. Published in 2004, *'The Gershon Review: Releasing resources to the frontline'*<sup>3</sup>, set out the conclusions of Sir Peter Gershon's review of public sector efficiency. In particular, it set out the scope for further efficiencies that he identified within the public sector's procurement, transaction service and policy-making functions. The publication of the review led to changes in procurement practices and the ways in which local authorities, in particular, operate. Combined with the efficiency drive, is the emergence of the new local performance framework, which aims

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8595264>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8595264>

<sup>3</sup> Gershon, P. (2004) *Releasing resources to the front line: Independent Review of Public Sector Efficiency* (HMSO: London) [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/C/A/efficiency\\_review120704.pdf](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/C/A/efficiency_review120704.pdf)

to reform the way in which public services are delivered. Whilst the Empowerment White Paper, published earlier this year, suggested that RIEPs can have a crucial role in ensuring empowerment is embedded in local authorities' improvement and efficiency work. It is with this backdrop in mind that RIEPs can best be understood.

This bulletin will begin by considering what RIEPs are in more detail and how they fit into the CLG's and LGA's *'National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy'*<sup>4</sup>, before moving on to consider how they fit within the broader context of the local performance framework. The bulletin will finish with a number of concluding remarks around the challenges facing RIEPs.

## **The National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy**

The quality of public services, and the local authorities that deliver them, make a huge difference to people's quality of life and standard of living. Where we live, how we travel, our health and education services, and our ability to access and sustain employment all have a significant impact on our lifestyle, well-being and prospects. Local government plays a fundamental part in this and, accounting for over a quarter of all public spending, there are demands for it to be efficient, effective and accountable.

Published in January 2008, the *'National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy'* sets out the Government's vision for providing the support required for local authorities to "transform and improve services and to build the local leadership capacity needed to create the sort of places people want to live" (p.1). The Strategy has been agreed by central and local government, and backed by over £380 million available over the next three years, aims to support local government to lead the delivery of shared priorities, enabled by the devolution of resources from central to local government.

### ***What are RIEPs?***

RIEPs are at the heart of the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy, responding to the challenges of streamlining and devolving resources and supporting councils and partners to take on increased responsibility for a range of improvement issues. They will have a critical role in supporting councils to deliver efficient and effective services for residents. According to the Improvement and Development Agency<sup>5</sup>:

"A RIEP is a network of councils, fire authorities and other local services that have come together to challenge, collaborate and share ideas and expertise. They coordinate and support improvement, innovation and efficiency work at a regional, and often sub-regional, level".

RIEPs are led by councillors who are advised by a group drawn from council chief executives, partners and representatives from organisations within the region. Out of the total government funding of over £380 million for the National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy, £185 million has been allocated to RIEPs over the next three years. Referring to IDeA's guidance, each RIEP is represented on a Chief Executive's Task Group (CEXTG) that forms a critical link between local authorities in each region, the LGA's Improvement Board and central government. Reflecting the government's current rhetoric of devolution, "RIEPs will have the flexibility to determine how best to use the resources allocated to them to achieve the improvement outcomes councils have agreed through the LAA process and the efficiency targets set in CSR [Comprehensive Spending Review] 2007"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> CLG & LGA (2008) *National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy* (CLG Publications: Wetherby)  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/649026.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8595264>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/37918>

**The nine RIEPs:**

1. South East Improvement and Efficiency Partnership;
2. Lift South West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership;
3. Capital Ambition – London;
4. East Midlands Improvement Partnership;
5. West Midlands Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership;
6. Building Capacity: East of England Regional Improvement Partnership;
7. Improvement Partnership for North East;
8. Yorkshire and Humber Improvement Partnership;
9. North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership.

**What will RIEPs do?**

Typically, RIEPs will be responsible for the following types of activities:

- ❑ providing support to enable local authorities and their partners to take responsibility for their own improvement and achieve significant improvements and efficiency savings;
- ❑ co-ordinating the support provided by other regional and national agencies;
- ❑ supporting innovation and the sharing of good practice;
- ❑ assisting councils in difficulty to tackle poor performance through tailored, co-ordinated support.

**Case Study: Northwest Improvement and Efficiency Strategy 2008/11<sup>7</sup>**

In order to address the priorities of the region, the Northwest Improvement and Efficiency Strategy is based on an analysis of the twenty two LAAs in the area. From this analysis six priorities emerged and form the basis of the 3-year Strategy. These priorities are:

1. economic development and regeneration;
2. health and social care;
3. community safety;
4. community empowerment and neighbourhood delivery;
5. children's and young people's services;
6. environmental quality and climate change.

The North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership also states that, in discussions, local authorities have identified the need for support to be directed at the 'enablers' of improvement, as well as at services and improved outcomes. In light of this, they will also be investing the following areas:

- ❑ LAAs and support for Local Strategic Partnerships: they will support the sharing of innovative approaches across the region, and help to build understanding of the new requirements of the new performance framework;
- ❑ member and workforce development: they will work to increase the capacity of managers to lead transformational change and effective partnership working;
- ❑ equality, diversity and cohesion: it is important for local authorities and their partners to develop people who share a commitment to promoting community cohesion.

The North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership will also work to support best practice by promoting exchanges of learning on how best to nurture innovation within councils and across partnerships. The partnership also aims to help local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships in difficulty to improve performance. To achieve this they will set up a regional panel with representatives from local government, the Audit Commission, other inspectorates, Government Office North West and the Improvement and Development Agency to identify general areas for improvement in performance, as well as at risk authorities and services areas which would benefit from specific support.

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<sup>7</sup> North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (2008) *Northwest Improvement and Efficiency Strategy 2008/11* (NWIEP: Wigan) <http://www.nwce.gov.uk/files/NWIEP%20Strategy%20010408.pdf>

## What is the policy background?

### ***The New Local Performance Framework***

The new local performance framework aims to reform the way in which public services are delivered – in health, welfare, housing, employment, education, communities, economic development, policing and community safety, the environment and beyond. It is hoped that the new local performance framework “will help Government to focus on its priorities in a co-ordinated way and transfer power from Whitehall to local authorities and to communities”<sup>8</sup>, making local authorities and their partners more responsive to local need. In essence the new local performance framework is about two things: improving the quality of public life in places; and better public services.

There are five key facets to the performance framework, which are outlined in this Bulletin:

1. **Sustainable Community Strategy**

Every local authority is under a duty to consult widely in developing the strategy, which acts as the starting point for local delivery. The Sustainable Community Strategy creates a long-term, sustainable vision in an area and serves to set the agenda for the priorities in the LAA.

2. **Single Set of 198 National Indicators**

As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007, the government published the Single Set of 198 National Indicators<sup>9</sup> that will act as the cornerstone of the new local performance framework. These indicators cover all the national priority outcomes which local authorities are responsible for delivering. These indicators will be used to measure performance in all areas over the next three years.

3. **Local Area Agreements**

LAAs are perhaps the most important element of the new local performance framework. Broadly, an LAA can be defined as an agreement set between local and central government intending to give local authorities more flexibility in the way in which they set out and meet targets, spend funding and deliver public services. Local authorities will be measured against all of the 198 Single Set of Indicators, however, each LAA will have up to 35 national priority targets. It is hoped that LAAs will increase prioritisation and coordination of public services at the local level.

4. **Comprehensive Area Assessment**

Introduced as of April 2009, the Comprehensive Area Assessment will provide assurance about how well run local public services are and how effectively taxpayers' money is being spent locally. In addition, the CAA will develop a shared view about the particular challenges facing an area, for example, community cohesion or housing shortages.

5. **The National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy**

This strategy is intended to foster a strategic approach, agreed by government, local authorities and partners, in achieving the priorities agreed through LAAs. This strategy supports a devolved approach with a stronger role for local government in supporting and challenging performance. For more on this, see the section on National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy.

### ***Local Government White Paper***

Having outlined the five key facets of the new local performance framework, this bulletin will now go on to consider the key policy documents that have framed the Framework; beginning

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<sup>8</sup> CLG (2008) *National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships: Handbook of Definitions* (CLG: London) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/735112.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> CLG (2007) *The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities & Local Authority Partnerships: Single Set of National Indicators* (CLG: London) <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/505713.pdf>

with the Local Government White Paper. Published in October 2006, the Local Government White Paper, *'Strong and Prosperous Communities'*<sup>10</sup>, advocated measures to give local authorities greater opportunities to lead their area, work with other services, and better meet the public's needs. This approach sees the rejection of a 'one size fits all' model, rather, local authorities are to be provided with the freedom and space to respond with flexibility to local needs and demands; giving local authorities the powers and responsibilities to shape local places. As such, for many, the Local Government White Paper signals the devolution and re-balancing of the relationship between central and local government, with a break away from the traditional vertical power relationship and a move towards a horizontal relationship.

The Local Government White Paper also increased the significance of LAAs, firmly establishing them as a tool to enhance performance management in the local public sector. The White Paper also set out the argument for responsive services, this includes by: extending choice over public services; giving local people more say in running local services; and encouraging citizen and community empowerment securing participation and responding to local concerns. By allowing people to shape and choose services on a personal basis, the government hoped that this would lead to greater empowerment in communities. The Local Government White Paper also set out the role of local government as strategic leaders and 'place shapers', that is to say,

"To consider what should happen to ensure that their 'place' has a viable economic future; how to adapt to demographic shifts; to assess and mitigate the impact of climate change on their locality; to help turn offenders away from crime; and to build a cohesive community" (p.94)

Furthermore, the Local Government White Paper presented government's vision for an effective, accountable and responsive local government. Enhancing the capacity, efficiency and effectiveness of local government and the local public services they deliver. As outlined later in this bulletin, RIEPs are intended to play a key role in delivering this.

#### ***Empowerment White Paper – 'Communities in Control: real people, real power'***

Published in July 2008, *'Communities in control: real people, real power'*<sup>11</sup>, or the Empowerment White Paper, sets out the Government's plans on "passing more and more political power to more and more people using, using every practical means available" (p.21). The White Paper explores a number of themes, including: volunteering; access to information; having an influence; and standing for office. Another key theme to emerge from the Empowerment White Paper is that of engaging people in the development and commissioning of services. With the White Paper calling for "Better measurement of satisfaction; service design with the involvement of users and customers; and the identification of different groups of service users with different needs" (p.73). Further to this, the new 'duty to involve' means that all local authorities have a responsibility to inform, consult and involve the communities they serve. This is underpinned by the principle that involving local communities will ensure better decisions and improve value for money, as well as empowering the communities that local authorities serve.

According to the Empowerment White Paper, the work of RIEPs and the Regional Empowerment Partnerships (REPs) can support local authorities in involving people in improving services and influencing local decisions. Furthermore, according to the Empowerment White Paper, "The work of the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) and the Regional Empowerment Partnerships (REPs) can support local authorities in involving people in improving services and influencing local decisions" (p.74). Further to this, the government states that they will encourage greater collaborative working between RIEPs in order to ensure empowerment and engagement are embedded in local authorities' improvement and efficiency work.

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<sup>10</sup> DCLG (2006) *Strong and Prosperous Communities: The Local Government White Paper* (HMSO: London)  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/152456.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> CLG (2008) *Communities in Control: Real people, real power* (HMSO: London)  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/886045.pdf>

### ***Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration***

Published in July 2007, the Review<sup>12</sup> highlighted the importance of local government's impact on the communities they serve, and also in particular its role as a 'place shaper' for localities and local economies. 'Place Shaping' and strong local governance is embedded in the process of LAAs, with local authorities viewed as leaders of local coalitions of partners and service deliverers.

### **Why are RIEPs important?**

#### ***A vision for improvement and efficiency support***

Rising customer expectations for better quality services; demands for involvement in planning and delivery; and a tighter financial climate, both in light of the 'credit crunch' and also the target of 3% efficiency gains that has been set across the public sector, all require the efficiency, innovation and improvement of local authorities and the services they deliver. In order to achieve this; effective and transparent performance management must be in place and RIEPs will play a crucial role in this process. According to *'Prospectus 2008: the guide to improvement and efficiency support'*<sup>13</sup>, CLG will work closely with RIEPs to agree a package of support to build the knowledge, analytical capabilities, and capacity of local authorities and partners to make better public spaces, "in particular by promoting effective delivery of urban green spaces, place management, mixed communities; and business engagement and support" (p.45). To encourage the better use of information and analytical capacity, CLG is aiming to make resources available to provide training and capacity building advisors. This would be routed through RIEPs, and a network of digital advisors locally administered through a devolved framework contract.

#### ***Community empowerment***

Following on from the publication of the Empowerment White Paper, community empowerment continues as a significant theme in the *'National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy'*. The strategy aims to give communities "a strong voice enabling them to play a role in reforming services so that they genuinely respond to local people's needs" (p.8). CLG is working to support local authorities in giving communities a stronger voice in reforming services so that they are responsive to local need, as well as empowering communities to have greater influence over local decisions and the delivery of local services.

#### ***Supporting Local Area Agreements***

As outlined above, the Local Government White Paper affirmed the role of LAAs in providing a basis to take the next steps in the improvement of public services – in crime, healthcare and well being, economic development amongst others. LAAs aim to reflect real prioritisation and greater coordination at a local level, complemented with targeted impact in disadvantaged communities. Delivering this will require strong local partnerships, and according to the document *'Prospectus 2008: the guide to improvement and efficiency support'*,

"Local authorities and their partners need to be able to understand what their communities want, and to work together effectively to provide the right services, with increasing efficiency and in ways that suit the needs of users and citizens" (p.3)

This strategy is intended to create a strategic approach, agreed by government, local authorities and partners, in achieving the priorities agreed through LAAs.

#### ***Local ownership of improvement***

RIEPs are, according to the *'National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy'*, "at the heart of a more devolved approach to supporting improvement and efficiency" (p.9). RIEPs will also have a crucial role in "setting the strategic ambition for improvement and efficiency, using robust

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<sup>12</sup> HM Treasury (2007) *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration* (HMSO: London)

<sup>13</sup> CLG & LGA (2008) *Prospectus 2008: the guide to improvement and efficiency support* (CLG Publications: Wetherby)

evidence and providing strong support for localities through the commissioning and co-ordinating of support" (ibid). RIEPs will also play an important role in identifying where resources should be spent, and assisting councils and partners in difficulty. According to the strategy, "where authorities are facing improvement challenges, the RIEP will be actively involved both at the officer and member level, in providing, brokering and coordinating support to meet LAA targets and tackle any areas of underperformance" (p.10). It is hoped that RIEPs will develop the capacity to deal with an increasing range of performance challenges and eventually provide comprehensive support, with a view to reduce the need for action by central government. Again, this highlights how, in theory, responsibility for the allocation of resources has been devolved from central government. In light of this emphasis on the significance of the regional and local levels, RIEPs have evolved differently in each region to reflect their diverse needs and circumstances.

### ***Simplifying the current improvement and efficiency architecture***

It is hoped that the development of RIEPs will help to clarify the current systems for delivery support. First and foremost, it is hoped that merging the Regional Centres of Excellence (RCEs) and Regional Improvement Partnerships (RIPs) to create RIEPs will go some way in simplifying improvement support. RIEPs will form a hub linking together existing forms of support (such as the Improvement and Development Agency, Regional Associates and Government Offices), making it easier for councils and their partners to access the right assistance at the right time. Similarly, the government is also integrating the work of the Academy for Sustainable Communities, English Partnerships, and the Housing Corporation to come together through the new Homes and Communities Agency. According to *'Prospectus 2008: the guide to improvement and efficiency support'*, the Homes and Communities Agency will "evolve a stronger role with RIEPs to commission and deliver support on both the sustainable homes, and community and strategic planning agendas" (p.45).

### ***Strategic planning***

A key aspect of RIEPs' role will be to develop Regional Improvement and Efficiency Strategies (RIES) for the Comprehensive Spending Review period. The aim of RIES is to set out the key ambitions for the region, as well as the core improvement and efficiency objectives to support local authorities to deliver their strategic objections. According to the *'National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy'*, in order to ensure accountability, RIEPs are required to "base their regional improvement and efficiency strategy (RIES) on a robust analysis of need across the region, using both data and consultation to develop the strategy" (p.12).

## **Conclusions**

In CLES' view, public services must be taken seriously; and all local authorities ought to recognise the economic, social and environmental impact of the services they deliver and commission. CLES also feels that public services must respond to the nature of place, with the localisation of services to meet a community's particular needs, and as such, we welcome steps to increase the professionalism of public services and promote efficiency. However, we have identified a number of challenges that need to be addressed in order for RIEPs to deliver what they set out to achieve. CLES will be monitoring the development of RIEPs and welcome feedback from members on their views.

- ❑ in the current climate of environmental threats, shrinking local investment, loss of jobs and squeezed public spending; local authorities need to shift from prevailing orthodoxies on local economic development to a new way of thinking. Are RIEPs equipped to help local authorities with this paradigm shift?
- ❑ there is a risk that whilst RIEPs are an attempt to co-ordinate efficiency and improvement support, they may in fact increase bureaucracy and serve to divert local authorities' time and attention away from service delivery;
- ❑ it is essential that central government and Government Offices communicate examples of good practice to local authorities and set out clearly the role that RIEPs

- play; what they will expect from local authorities; and what local authorities can expect from them;
- ❑ accountability will be vital, and clear frameworks must be in place to ensure that RIEPs' activities are held to account;
  - ❑ it is essential that a RIEP's strategy is based on a robust assessment of the current challenges facing local authorities and their partners, and for the support provided by the partnership to be seen as adding real value by them.
  - ❑ RIEPs have, potentially, a very broad agenda. As such, RIEPs must ensure their activity is targeted and relevant to the local context;
  - ❑ the relationship between RIEPs and the new Homes and Communities Agency is, at present, unclear. Clarification is required if partnership working is to be successful;
  - ❑ RIEPs are also faced with the challenge of ensuring the visibility of the partnership, the strategy and programmes with other key stakeholders in the region, as well as ensuring member engagement.

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