



National Audit Office

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AUDITOR GENERAL

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Department for Communities  
and Local Government

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# Central government's communication and engagement with local government

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National Audit Office

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Department for Communities and Local Government

# Central government's communication and engagement with local government

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Amyas Morse  
Comptroller and Auditor General  
National Audit Office

11 June 2012

At its best, good communication supports engagement and collaborative working, leading to better outcomes. With pressure to reduce spending, it is more important than ever that central government engages effectively with local government to draw on its expertise and capability in designing and delivering good quality, efficient public services.

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This report can be found on the National Audit Office website at [www.nao.org.uk/central-to-local-gov-2012](http://www.nao.org.uk/central-to-local-gov-2012)

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## Foreword

**1** Subject to parliamentary approval, when the Audit Commission closes the NAO expects to assume the Commission's role in setting the framework for local audit through a code of audit practice. In preparation, we are working closely with the Commission to understand the role fully and the audit work carried out by the auditors of local public bodies. We are engaging directly with local authorities and auditors to understand their views on the scope and nature of local audit, to help us take this work forward.

**2** We have said to Parliament that we will expand gradually our programme of value-for-money examinations to consider local government more explicitly. The NAO is uniquely placed to evaluate the value for money of public spending, tracking funding and delivery from national to local level. We plan to expand our programme of value-for-money studies of local services, with three studies in 2012-13, four in 2013-14 and six in 2014-15. The Public Accounts Commission has approved additional resources for the NAO to cover the cost of this work. We will work closely with bodies, such as the Local Government Association, to make sure that our programme complements the sector's self-improvement work.

**3** Our proposal to develop our value-for-money programme was supported by the Department for Communities and Local Government in its response to the *Future of Local Audit: Consultation* (January 2012). The Communities and Local Government Select Committee, in its report *Audit and Inspection of Local Authorities* (July 2011), recommended that our programme should give due weight to local government services and spending. In our work, we do not intend to replace local accountability by holding individual local authorities to account. Instead, our focus will be on sector-wide issues and how they can best be addressed.

**4** This first report examines how central government communicates and engages with local government. Communication is the two-way exchange of information. To be successful, bodies must develop good relationships and understand their audience. At its best, good communication supports engagement and collaborative working, leading to better outcomes. With pressure to reduce spending, it is more important than ever that central government engages effectively with local government to draw on its expertise and capability in designing and delivering good quality, efficient public services.

## Key facts

**353**

local authorities  
in England

**£29.7bn**

central government's  
general contribution  
to local government in  
England in 2010-11

**26%**

real terms reduction in  
contribution by 2014-15

<b>£179 billion</b>	total local government expenditure in the UK in 2010-11, including expenditure funded by specific grants
<b>Over 18,000</b>	councillors in England
<b>744,000</b>	emails sent by central government departments and agencies to local government in March 2012
<b>1,335</b>	statutory duties on local authorities as at June 2011
<b>308</b>	consultation documents issued by seven departments <sup>1</sup> between 2010 and 2012
<b>65 per cent</b>	of consultations, from seven departments over two years, asked for a response in under 60 working days
<b>46,814</b>	subscribers to info4local, central government's website service for local authorities
<b>£218,000</b>	cost of info4local in 2011-12

<sup>1</sup> Departments for Communities and Local Government, Education, Health, Transport, Work and Pensions, Environment Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Office.

## Summary

**1** At around £179 billion, total expenditure by local government accounted for around one quarter of total managed public expenditure in the UK in 2010-11.<sup>2</sup> Communication between central and local government is inherently complex. Local government comprises a large number of democratically elected bodies of varying sizes, and with broad responsibilities relating to the people who live and work in their areas. Local government balances its local priorities with the need to deliver national objectives, set through Whitehall departments and agencies, which have a more distant relationship with communities.

**2** The government aims to devolve more power to local level with new freedoms and flexibility for local authorities. Achieving the changes set out in the 2011 Localism Act and Open Public Services White Paper will require a less directive relationship with local government. Central government also plans to reduce its general contribution to local government in England from £29.7 billion in 2010-11 to £24.2 billion in 2014-15, a reduction of 26 per cent in real terms.<sup>3</sup> Making structured cost reductions alongside fundamental cultural changes will require considerable effort and a strengthened commitment to joined-up working.

**3** Now more than ever, with responsibilities such as public health moving to local government, the vital role of local authorities in the government's decentralisation agenda, and at the same time increased pressures from substantial staff reductions, it is essential that central government communicates and engages well with local government. Public policies and the programmes to implement them often require balancing the aspirations and interests of a wide variety of groups.<sup>4</sup> Engagement through the cycle from policy development to delivery helps to build shared ownership, draw out practical implications and reduce the risk of waste. A number of our recent reports have demonstrated the importance of government departments engaging with and incentivising local authorities. For example:

- insufficient engagement with fire and rescue authorities was one factor that led to a major project to replace control rooms being cancelled in 2010. The project did not have the support of the majority of the end-users essential to its success, which wasted a minimum of £469 million;<sup>5</sup> and

<sup>2</sup> HM Treasury, *Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA) 2011 tables*, Chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup> HM Treasury, *Spending Review 2010*, October 2010.

<sup>4</sup> National Audit Office, *Guide: Initiating successful projects*, 1 December 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *The failure of the FiReControl project*, Session 2010-2012, HC 1272, National Audit Office, 1 July 2011.



- our report on flood risk management<sup>6</sup> found that while some good progress had been made, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs needed to clarify and more effectively communicate the steps required for local authorities to implement some key measures.

**4** This report examines the effectiveness of central government's communication and engagement with local government. It is structured around the following features of effective communication and engagement distilled from our fieldwork in central and local government:

- **Part One** covers the conditions that support central and local government in working together effectively. These conditions include: understanding local government; developing effective relationships; and joint working and partnership.
- **Part Two** covers sharing knowledge to develop policies and services that work. This requires clear articulation and sharing of programmes; early work with local government to draw on knowledge and expertise; consultation in a timely and effective way; and effective feedback to give confidence that views and insights are being heard.
- **Part Three** covers how high-quality, timely, well targeted, coordinated and accessible communications support efficient and effective business.

## Key findings

**5 The organisational differences between central and local government make communication very challenging, and in messages that flow from the centre it is central government that bears the responsibility as communicator.** Government departments focus on particular policies, whereas with over 1,300 statutory duties local government has wider responsibility across policies that affect their communities. The differences bring significant risks of loss of focus and conflict between national and local priorities. Timely, effective communications are important in managing these risks and in using the knowledge of both central and local government to achieve joined-up services to meet the needs of local people.

**6 Our work across government has demonstrated that not consulting delivery partners early brings a high risk of waste and optimism bias that can result in programme failure.**<sup>7</sup> Where departments are designing local services, local authorities' operational experience is often important to effective design and implementation of programmes such as the conversion of maintained schools to academies (case study four, page 21). However, there is no consistent approach across government to drawing on local authorities' experience from the start.

<sup>6</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *Flood risk management in England*, Session 2010–2012, HC 1521, National Audit Office, 28 October 2011.

<sup>7</sup> National Audit Office, *Guide: Initiating Successful Projects*, 1 December 2011.

**7 Some policy consultations are rushed – in two-thirds of consultations in the two years to January 2012, the seven departments included in our analysis allowed less time than suggested in their own code of practice (60 working days).** Departments issue a disproportionate number of consultations just before parliamentary recess and the holiday periods of Easter, summer and Christmas. Many local authorities therefore find it difficult to coordinate their work on these consultations with their own political and business cycles, and to involve those communities or local organisations that may be directly affected. Local authorities would also like to see clearer feedback on how their views and experience have been taken into account.

**8 We identified good examples of departments articulating and sharing programmes for developing a policy (such as in adult social care – case study one, page 16), but this is not done consistently.** Some policies leave local government and its partners with gaps in the information they need to plan effectively over the course of a policy's initiation, development and implementation. There is a demand for more comprehensive, up-to-date information on major policy proposals and implementation, including key facts, objectives, timescales and progress. This would also support wider dialogue with local people and organisations likely to be involved in or affected by a proposed change.

**9 Though the majority of individual communications are good quality, the large volume of communications between central and local government means that poor quality communications still have a significant impact – in March 2012, some 744,000 emails were sent by central government and its agencies and non-departmental public bodies to local government.** Well-designed communications such as the newsletters from the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department of Health provide very helpful signposting to local authority officers. However, local authorities are exasperated by the poor signposting of some communications they receive from central government departments, which wastes the time of the hundreds of people who receive each one. Departments' standards and oversight of communications with local government are not sufficiently systematic to eliminate the risk of some poor communications slipping through. This is a particular concern to local authority managers working with fewer staff following cost reductions, who therefore need to understand and act on communications more quickly.

**10 Local authority staff find departments' websites generally helpful in their content and design.** However, three of the five departments' websites we examined have only limited functionality specifically to help local authorities. The info4local service, which provides a means of finding relevant information on the websites of departments, agencies and other public bodies, is widely used by local government and users record high levels of satisfaction.

**11 Engagement between staff in central and local government, and the involvement of representative and professional bodies, is extensive and diverse but is not systematic.** There is a range of activities and initiatives by departments that are viewed positively, and which individually help to build better understanding in central government of the political, operational and contextual differences in local government. For example, three departments have formalised relationships between their senior staff and local government, with the connections developed by the Department for Communities and Local Government particularly well received. While such activities help to build knowledge and facilitate how local authorities access the right people and information, the need for them to be developed further to become more systematic is widely acknowledged in both arms of government.

**12 Working directly with local government provides insights for departments into how policies and services are joined up at local level.** Programmes where staff from central and local government work together, as with the 'Whole-Place pilots' (case study two, page 17), are supporting new ways of working and genuine sharing of expertise. As well as having potential to build institutional learning, such initiatives can also show how departments should work better with each other, as well as with local government, to improve design and delivery of local services.

## **Overall conclusion**

**13** Communication and engagement between local and central government is inherently challenging owing to differences in scale, function, and accountability to elected representatives. It is clear that both sides apply considerable energy and goodwill to the interface, with the Department for Communities and Local Government taking the leading role on decentralisation, and we highlight good practice in this report.

**14** However, there are areas where central government could do better: in directing its communications to best fit local government partners; and in fulfilling its commitments on engagement, notably consultation. Resolving these issues will lead to more effective working relationships, and our recommendations have this objective in mind.

## Recommendations

- a To build institutional knowledge that is essential to working effectively with local government, departments must improve the standards, flow and accessibility of communications.** Specifically departments should:
- monitor standards for written communications, so that messages are more focused with less need for clarification;
  - assess the need for changes to the volume and flow of communications with local government in light of our analysis;
  - review, with input from local authorities, how departmental websites can provide greater utility through features such as the role and contact details of key staff;
  - review the knowledge and attributes staff require to work effectively with local government, build these into staff development programmes and departmental processes and identify opportunities for joint learning; and
  - mitigate the risk of loss of institutional knowledge, such as that gained through relationships between senior staff and local government, by systematically sharing knowledge and experience of local government within and across departments.
- b Departments should fulfil their commitments on engagement and consultation with local authorities by:**
- providing clear, accessible policy intentions, milestones and other important facts, continuously updated throughout the development and implementation of major policies;
  - engaging early with local authorities, and representative and professional bodies, as key partners unless there is a good reason not to;
  - managing the volume and timing of formal consultations to allow local government to give a considered response using their experience of joining up services locally; and
  - spelling out clearly how local government's contribution has, or has not, altered policy proposals.
- c In order to achieve a coherent approach, the Department for Communities and Local Government should work with other departments to assess progress in implementing these recommendations across government.**

# Part One

## Developing the conditions for central and local government to work together

**1.1** Issues that concern policymakers often emerge from activities and experiences of local communities, such as in education and crime. Local authority councillors' and officers' knowledge and insights from their work with communities are valuable in exploring effective solutions. By developing a culture to openly share their perspectives, central and local government both have much to gain from using shared knowledge to build institutional learning across their organisations.

**1.2** A joined-up approach is not a new concept. Our 2001 report *Modern policy-making: ensuring policies deliver value for money*<sup>8</sup> outlined the importance of understanding problems and assessing how policies may work in practice. This part of the report examines the following conditions we have identified as necessary for central and local government to work effectively together:

- understanding the context and how local government operates, including structure, delivery responsibilities and the political environment;
- developing mutually informative relationships between central and local government staff that support continuity by sharing knowledge across and between organisations;
- engaging in joint working and partnership both through representative groups and directly with authorities; and
- evolving a strategy to achieve institutional learning across all of government.

### How well central government understands local government

**1.3** A strong theme from local authorities was that many staff in government departments do not understand local government priorities, structures and business well. At the same time, many recognised that they too needed to understand the pressures on civil servants, for people in central and local government to work better together. For example, civil servants have a duty to carry out the business of the minister. In contrast, local authority officers have a statutory duty to provide open and frank advice to the whole council, across all political parties. A message from central government in the style of 'command and control' can overlook the multifaceted nature of local politics and the democratic imperative to give due weight to local political priorities.

<sup>8</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *Modern policy-making: ensuring policies deliver value for money*, Session 2001-02, HC 289, National Audit Office, 1 November 2001.

**1.4** There are five types of local authority (**Figure 1**). The 353 local authorities in England vary widely, some serving populations in thousands, others in millions. Staff numbers range from a small district with 90 employees to a large county council with more than 12,000. This affects the ability of councils to work with and respond to central government. Civil servants cannot take account of every difference. Even so, communications which imply that local implementation can be 'one-size-fits-all', based on the unitary council model, can make implementation more difficult where local authorities have to reinterpret policy to fit their local context and structure. Local authority officers also felt that in two-tier areas that have a county council and district councils, departmental officials often assume that there is a hierarchical relationship in which the county has lead responsibility. In fact counties and districts have distinct roles and operate as separate, democratically elected bodies.

**Figure 1**  
Types and numbers of authorities

There are five types of local authority which vary widely in population, size and cost of services

Type of authority	Number of authorities	Examples
<b>Two tier</b>		
County council	27	<b>Nottinghamshire</b> County in a two-tier system with seven districts (City of Nottingham is a unitary authority). Population 777,000. Gross cost of county services in 2010-11 approximately £1,226 million.
District council	201	<b>South Lakeland</b> Rural district in two-tier system within the county of Cumbria. Population 104,000. Gross cost of services in 2010-11 approximately £99 million.
<b>Single tier</b>		
Metropolitan	36	<b>Stockport</b> In the Greater Manchester area. Population 284,000. Gross cost of services in 2010-11 approximately £719 million.
London borough	33	<b>London Borough of Brent</b> In outer London, with strategic administration also provided by the Greater London Authority. High population density: 288,100 in area of 43 km <sup>2</sup> . Gross cost of services in 2010-11 approximately £1,231 million.
Unitary (including the Isles of Scilly)	56	<b>Cornwall</b> Formerly comprised county, district and borough councils. Population 535,300. With 19,140 staff, is the largest employer in the county. Gross cost of services in 2010-11 £1,381 million.

Source: National Audit Office analysis

**1.5** The roles of councils differ. Single tier authorities (unitary authorities, London boroughs and metropolitan councils) typically provide the majority of local services. In areas with two tiers of local government, responsibilities such as planning, waste collection and disposal and highways may be carried out either by the county or district council. Not all areas provide services in the same way. For example, central government communications on education policy do not always recognise that different issues arise because some areas have primary and secondary schools while others also have middle schools. Some authorities have also received communications about services for which they do not have statutory responsibility. For example, the Department for Transport has sent correspondence about road traffic signs to district councils which are not responsible for highways. District councils can become aware of communications that apply to them but have only been sent to the county council, thus delaying the start of any action they might need to take.

### Developing effective relationships and contacts

**1.6** Local authorities are bound by statute. The Department for Communities and Local Government estimates that in 2011 there were more than 1,300 statutory duties placed on local authorities. Of these, more than 75 per cent were sponsored by five departments (**Figure 2**).

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#### Figure 2

##### Departmental sponsors of local authority duties

**In 2011, more than 75 per cent of statutory duties placed on local authorities were sponsored by five government departments**

Department	Count of separate local authority duties
Transport	299
Communities and Local Government	217
Education	201
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	189
Health	105
Other departments	324
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,335</b>

*Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, review of statutory duties placed on local government, June 2011.*

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**1.7** So many duties for local authorities working across diverse communities make it a challenge to develop effective relationships and contacts between central and local government. However, achieving any reduction in volume is difficult. In the course of a cross-government review of statutory duties placed on local authorities in 2011,<sup>9</sup> among 21,000 comments on whether duties could be removed 90 per cent supported keeping specific duties, while just 10 per cent suggested duties that could be considered for removal.

**1.8** Local authority officers value direct contact with departmental staff, and particularly appreciate those who clearly understand the local government context. Local councillors and politicians in Westminster – both MPs and ministers – also have established relationships and direct contacts that are seen as helpful and a good source of knowledge for both parts of government. However, most departments do not routinely publish the roles and contact details of key staff.

**1.9** The need for direct contact between central and local government was partly met by the now closed regional government offices. Recognising the benefits for central and local government from building direct contacts, the Department for Communities and Local Government has given over 70 of its senior officials responsibilities as 'locality leads' across 14 regions. Each region has a lead director, supported by deputy directors. In addition to their policy responsibilities, these officials have a role to become familiar with issues facing authorities in their area by visiting and keeping in touch. They act as a two-way conduit to share information and good practice, and facilitate access to the right people, including in other government departments.

**1.10** The Department piloted and launched these arrangements in June 2011 and estimates that its 'locality leads' spend between 5 and 10 per cent of their time carrying out this role. While local authorities recognised that these relationships are still developing, they appreciated the access they afforded to knowledge about policy developments with implications for local government. Several chief executives we surveyed volunteered the locality lead arrangements as an example of good practice and the arrangements were frequently mentioned positively during our local authority visits.

**1.11** While the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills was not one of the five Departments we examined,<sup>10</sup> local authorities cited its six regional teams as helpful. Their role includes: helping local government understand the Department's national priorities; coordinating economic development; and helping partnerships build capacity and capability. The Department for Transport has similarly established three local engagement teams covering the south, midlands/south-west and north of England. Although the smaller presence from Transport was less well known, it was welcomed by those who were aware of it.

<sup>9</sup> Communities and Local Government, *Summary of the review of statutory duties placed on local government*, June 2011. The list of statutory duties notes that the "list is by no means exhaustive and should not be taken as setting out all of the legal responsibilities of local government".

<sup>10</sup> We focused on five departments with high levels of interaction with local government: Communities and Local Government, Work and Pensions, Health, Transport and Education.



**1.12** Local authority staff also cited direct contacts with staff in departments made in the course of their work, which were helpful and constructive. They identified particular individuals in departments who have a strong personal commitment to good engagement face-to-face. For example, despite its small size, the HM Treasury expenditure team had made connections and developed relationships through the Local Government Association, regional events, and contact with particular authorities. The Treasury team views these connections as important, given that most policymaking involves the Treasury from the start, and local authorities are well placed to advise on how policies may eventually be implemented.

### **Joint working and partnership**

**1.13** There are several local government representative and professional bodies. Many act as a conduit for communication with central government on different issues because they can concentrate expertise and present a consolidated view. One of the factors that local authorities consider in deciding whether to respond directly to a government consultation is whether views would be represented adequately by, for example, the Local Government Association.

**1.14** Professional bodies, such as the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the Association of Directors of Children's Services, combine expertise and good practice with local experience of what works. **Case study one** overleaf shows how departments, by working closely with representative and professional bodies, can help ensure that policy and guidance reflects the knowledge of practitioners on the ground and supports their work. Professional associations can also provide interpretation of local authority insights on complex issues, as with, for example, the Association of Local Authority Treasurers in connection with the Local Government Resource Review (case study five, page 22).

**1.15** There are also geographical groupings, typically based around a region or Greater London, which give departments forums to discuss how national issues, such as unemployment, are affecting a particular region. Local enterprise partnerships are led by local authorities and businesses across natural economic areas. The partnerships aim to give strategic leadership to drive growth and create jobs. While relatively new, they were mentioned by some local authority officers and recognised as potential vehicles for joint working or communications between central and local government.

**1.16** Health and well-being boards, to be established in all areas of England from April 2013, were cited in several local authorities we visited as a good example of timely joint working with local government. The boards are planned as forums for local commissioners across the NHS, public health and social care, elected representatives, and representatives of HealthWatch. The Department of Health is working closely with authorities and representative bodies, such as the Local Government Association, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, to support the establishment of boards that meet the needs of their local areas.

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## Case study one

### Think Local, Act Personal, Department of Health

Our report *Oversight of user choice and provider competition in care markets* (September 2011) showed that much remains to be done to provide care for an aging population. However, there have been important achievements. For example, we reported that most of the 340,000 people using a personal budget had reported improved well-being although a small minority felt worse off.

Think Local, Act Personal is the partnership that underpins local authorities' work with health and third sector organisations to improve how adult social care is provided. It comprises over 30 national and umbrella organisations involved in adult social care. The partnership took over from the Putting People First programme, which began in December 2007, ended on 31 March 2011 and introduced the system of personal budgets for people eligible for publicly funded adult social care. The programme was foreshadowed in the Green Paper *Independence, well-being and choice* (2005) and White Paper *Our health, our care, our say: a new direction for community services* (2006).

Local authority officers working in this field positively cited Putting People First and subsequent publications and guidance as providing a 'golden thread' that has sustained understanding between the organisations involved over time, including the more recent change to the Think Local, Act Personal partnership. Putting People First was formed out of an agreement by six government departments, the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the NHS, representatives of independent sector providers, the Commission for Social Care Inspection, and other partners in December 2007. The agreement was just five pages long, well written and concise.

The programme has also been supported with tools, such as guidance and milestones to track local authorities' progress, created jointly by the Putting People First consortium comprising the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the Local Government Association and the Department of Health. Co-producing materials has helped ensure that they are meaningful to people working in local authorities and other organisations that commission and deliver services.

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**1.17** In September 2011, the Department of Health, with the Local Government Association and the early health and well-being boards, set up a National Learning Network to share knowledge on how the boards can improve health outcomes and be accountable to local communities. Of the relevant 152 authorities, over 140 have joined the Network and most have established their shadow boards.

## Joined-up approach to institutional learning across all of government

**1.18** The departments we examined provide limited routine training for their staff on local government. Externally provided courses are available but there are no records of departments' use of such training. The Department for Communities and Local Government used to run a course for all new staff, and is developing a new course, having identified that staff need to understand local government better.

**1.19** Local authority officers spoke of the most effective relationships as involving at least one person with direct experience of working in both central and local government. Individuals move between the two sectors, and departments sometimes move people to and from local authorities as a planned secondment. However, departments do not manage this movement of staff systematically against a strategy to improve understanding of, and engagement with, local government.

**1.20** High staff turnover and movement of staff are inevitable when departments make organisational changes in response to new policies and spending reductions. We have previously recommended that central government should actively monitor the effect of early departures on the civil service's skills and experience profile, to identify any erosion of capability,<sup>11</sup> because knowledge gained through relationships, contacts and joint working is easily lost when key people move on. The effect can be considerable for local authority officers, who have to invest time in developing new relationships and repeatedly explaining important features of their locality.

**1.21** The departments we examined do not systematically capture and share knowledge of local government across and between departments. Government officials and local government officers recognise that joining up services to best meet the needs of a local population is difficult because of the focus of departments on their principal policies and funding streams. Managing this challenge would benefit from a more planned approach to achieving institutional learning across government. This has the potential to improve design and delivery of local services. **Case study two** (Community Budgets) outlines an example of how central and local government staff are working with other partners to explore how resources can be used cost-effectively across local services, and plan to disseminate the joint lessons to other parts of government.

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### **Case study two**

#### Whole-Place Community Budgets, Department for Communities and Local Government

Whole-Place aims to explore how funding of local public services can be brought together to better support the redesign and implementation of local public services, eliminating duplication and filling gaps in provision. It seeks to apply resources more cost-effectively across services, according to local priorities. Four areas are piloting Whole-Place Community Budgets: Greater Manchester; Cheshire West and Chester; Essex; and a partnership of three London Boroughs. Areas have selected their own focus, including offender management, health and social care for older people, increasing economic growth and skills for young people.

The pilot programmes are running from March to October 2012. Each involves a team of local authority and local delivery body staff, the Local Government Association and currently 30 civil servants seconded from nine Whitehall departments. The Department for Communities and Local Government and local leaders plan to consider conclusions from the pilots in the autumn.

The approach pools expertise from government departments – including Communities and Local Government, Work and Pensions, Health, Home Office, Justice, Education, Business, Innovation and Skills and the Treasury – with understanding of communities' needs and the barriers to effective implementation. In asking areas to set their own focus, the approach aims to apply the combined expertise to genuinely local priorities, rather than issues chosen in Whitehall.

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<sup>11</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *Managing early departures in central government*, Session 2010–2012, HC 1795, National Audit Office, 15 March 2012.

## Part Two

### Sharing knowledge to develop effective policies and services

**2.1** Government departments are more likely to develop effective policies where they engage with people in local authorities who have experience of commissioning and delivering services. Given the numbers of local authorities, they cannot all be directly involved. However, that central government is seen to make all reasonable efforts to consult properly with local government is a major issue of trust, which can make or break the relationship between the two.

**2.2** This part of the report looks at central government's arrangements for drawing on the experience and knowledge of local government, and is structured around the following key features of effective engagement:

- having a clearly articulated programme and timescale, allowing local authorities to plan and participate;
- early application of local government's expertise through representative bodies or specially convened groups and contact;
- having clear and comprehensive consultations, with enough time for authorities to respond; and
- feedback on the rationale for decisions.

#### **Articulating and sharing the programme**

**2.3** Local authorities and other partners can contribute their expertise and commitment more effectively when central government has clearly stated its policy intentions and how it plans to achieve them.

**2.4** Think Local, Act Personal was cited as a policy area that has been transparent and shared since its origins in 2005 (case study one, page 16). Local authorities also highlighted examples of policies that they felt needed to be clearer. The most often cited example was the prospective change to Council Tax Benefit in April 2013 outlined in **case study three**. Practical issues that were considered to require greater clarity included coherence between Council Tax Benefit and Universal Credit, time to effect changes to IT and business process, and managing the overall impact on existing benefit recipients. The Localism Act was also frequently indicated as a policy that would benefit from more dialogue between central and local government. Improved discussion on the interpretation of the Act would allow local authorities to explain its implications to communities more clearly. In its June 2011 report,<sup>12</sup> the Communities and Local Government Select Committee pointed to inconsistency in how localism is defined and can therefore be interpreted differently by government departments.

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### Case study three

#### Welfare reforms, Departments for Work and Pensions and Communities and Local Government

The Departments for Work and Pensions and Communities and Local Government are introducing a series of welfare reforms in 2013, announced in the 2010 spending review.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are means-tested benefits. Housing Benefit has 4.98 million recipients and 5.9 million receive Council Tax Benefit. Housing costs will be paid within Universal Credit from October 2013 while council tax support funding is to be routed through the Department for Communities and Local Government from April 2013, as part of local authority funding in England, but reduced by 10 per cent. Within the Universal Credit programme local authorities are represented, including on the Programme Board and on secondment to the Department for Work and Pensions.

On 2 August 2011, the Department for Communities and Local Government began a consultation on proposals to transfer responsibility for council tax support to local authorities. In December 2011, the government published its response and introduced the Local Government Finance Bill, which includes provision for this change.

Under the new arrangements, local authorities have discretion to design their own schemes to administer council tax support. However, central government has directed that low-income pensioners will be protected from any reductions in support.

Local authorities we visited during January and February 2012 emphasised that there needed to be more effective coordination between the two departments to understand the impact and practicalities of this change. Their concerns included: their need for information from the Department for Work and Pensions to continue to ensure coherence with Universal Credit and to support local means testing; and insufficient time allowed for essential IT and business process change and integration for both council tax support and other welfare reforms. They told us that it would be difficult to manage the 10 per cent grant reduction where central government expects and mandates protection for large numbers of people, leaving it to be applied to other groups such as those in low paid employment.

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**2.5** Local authority officers considered there would be major mutual benefits if departments adopted a clearer, more visible programme management approach to major policy development. Having key information on a policy updated regularly and easily accessible in one place, such as a website, was proposed as a particularly important element of such an approach. Types of information could include:

- policy aims, objectives and intended outcomes;
- key documents, such as policy papers, plans, consultation and responses, and registers of risks and opportunities;
- interdependencies with other policies and programmes;
- timelines and milestones, and progress updates;
- key contacts for departments and stakeholders; and
- opportunities to discuss and share practice.

**2.6** By providing an up-to-date snapshot of a developing policy, such a vehicle would maximise shared knowledge and minimise the need for ad hoc enquiries about progress. It would also prompt local authority officers to consider how a policy would affect their community and be ready to respond, whether by providing further insights to the lead department or preparing for implementation. It could provide a convenient source of material for local authorities to share with local people and organisations, including the private sector. For departments, it would have added potential use in developing a joined-up approach with other government departments.

### **Early use of local government's knowledge and expertise**

**2.7** Early engagement with local government allows departments to understand operational constraints, challenges and opportunities, and potential impacts on, for example, rural areas and demographic groups, such as the elderly. Many local authority officers consider that departments should tap earlier into local government expertise, before formal consultation. The Department for Education took this approach before consulting on a revised version of *Working together to safeguard children* and the *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families*.<sup>13</sup> Officials worked on the draft document with a professional advisory group, including representatives from local authorities. In addition, eight local authorities are testing a more flexible approach to assessment, and are helping departmental officials to revise the draft to reflect the practicalities of implementing the changes.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and Home Office, *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families*, June 2000.

**2.8 Case study four** illustrates how the Department for Education could also have benefited from drawing more on local authority expertise in the early months of expanding the academies programme. Officials working on the programme are now making greater use of local knowledge, and the Department has a joint research project with the Local Government Association into the role of local authorities in the changed framework for schools.

**2.9** Most departments discuss policies with representative or professional local government groups, generally through consultative panels or groups set up to examine a specific policy. The Department for Work and Pensions set up such a group in preparing its new fraud and error strategy, which was published on 18 October 2010. There was, however, limited consultation with local authorities, for example, to discuss the impact on local authority benefit fraud investigators of creating a single fraud investigation service. The Department is now working with local authorities and other government departments to examine options to involve local authority investigation teams in the single fraud investigation service.

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## Case study four

### Academies, Department for Education

Academies are state schools that are independent of local authorities, and directly accountable to the Department for Education. Since May 2010, any maintained primary, secondary, or special school can seek academy status. In March 2012, there were 1,635 academies, and many more schools had applied. Our September 2010 report on the academies programme<sup>1</sup> concluded that many academies were performing impressively in delivering the programme's intended impacts. Many earlier academies had shown significant and sustained improvement. We also concluded that expansion would increase the scale of risks to value for money, particularly in the areas of financial sustainability, governance and management capacity.

Depending on a school's circumstances, converting to academy status can be complicated by legal and other complexities, such as leasing arrangements for land and buildings. Local authorities told us that early on in the programme for academy conversions the Department for Education had not routinely asked for their assistance with the conversion process, for example, for advice on an individual school's circumstances that the local authority would generally be aware of. This had sometimes led to unexpected issues that could have been addressed sooner had the local authority been involved earlier. Local authority officers felt that staff at the Department for Education were becoming more aware and appreciative of how early engagement with local authorities can support the conversion process.

The Department and the Local Government Association are at present conducting joint research into the role of local authorities in education and plan to publish a report in June 2012. Nine local authorities are participating in the research, some with a high proportion of recently converted academies, some with a mix of academies and maintained schools, and some with a high proportion of community and faith schools. An interim report was published on 28 February 2012.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, *Department for Education: The Academies Programme, Session 2010-11*, HC 288, National Audit Office, 10 September 2010.

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## Effective consultation providing sufficient time to engage

**2.10** It can be hard for departments to get consultations right. **Case study five** outlines features of the Department for Communities and Local Government's consultation the *Local Government Resource Review*.<sup>14</sup> Reactions to this consultation were mixed. Some finance professionals we spoke to praised the clarity of the consultation paper and welcomed the detail of supporting technical papers. They knew in advance what to expect, senior officials from the Department were available for discussions, and the Department provided support through professional networks. Others criticised the volume of material and suggested a lack, even so, of detail on practical impacts of the changes, and the short timescale for a consultation on such a complex subject.

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### Case study five

#### Local Government Resource Review: Business Rates Retention, Department for Communities and Local Government

Local authorities collect business rates from businesses in their area and pay them into a central pool to be redistributed as part of the Department's Formula Grant. The grant is extremely complex. In November 2011, the Committee of Public Accounts concluded that, "Multiple objectives for funding models have increased their complexity and reduced transparency. Particularly with the Department for Communities and Local Government's Formula Grant, it is virtually impossible to follow the link between calculated needs and funding allocations."

On 18 July 2011, the Department published the consultation on a rates-retention scheme to replace the current local government finance system, accompanied by a plain English guide. It included proposals to make councils more financially independent and provide an incentive to promote business growth by allowing them to keep a share of business rates growth in their area.

A month later, on 19 August, the Department published eight technical papers on how the proposals would affect local authorities. Taken together, the consultation and technical papers were 264 pages long and raised 33 questions about the proposed scheme. The closing date was 24 October 2011, giving 71 working days to respond, but only 47 working days from the time the technical papers were issued. The Secretary of State announced his response to the consultation on 19 December, accompanied by a plain English guide and separate summary of the responses to the consultation. The summary of responses noted that, "Many respondents in particular focused their responses on the main consultation document, rather than the detailed technical papers."

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## Scope and clarity of consultations

**2.11** A government consultation typically seeks comments and evidence on specific policy questions. Local authority officers appreciate the clarity of this approach, though it can mean that wider issues, which are important for local government, do not fit with the questions posed. For example, 100 of the 461 responses on proposals for business rates retention<sup>15</sup> did not specifically respond to any of the 33 questions, providing comments which had to be analysed separately. The comments included fundamental issues about the application of the proposals to bodies other than local authorities; queries about the baseline, growth incentive and protections; and concerns about

<sup>14</sup> Communities and Local Government, *Local Government Resource Review: Proposals for Business Rates Retention – Consultation*, 18 July 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Communities and Local Government, *Local Government Resource Review Proposals for Business Rates Retention – Consultation: Summary of responses*, 19 December 2011.



timetabling and complexity. HM Treasury's call for evidence on private finance initiative reform was cited as a consultation that covered wider issues that local authorities would wish to comment on and welcomed suggestions on different financial models.

**2.12** In deciding whether to respond, local authorities consider a consultation's likely impact locally and on resources. Officers seek to fully understand the issues, so that they can present them clearly to council and, where necessary, discuss them with local people and organisations. Local authorities can find it difficult to respond to a consultation on policy principles where they need to know more about how a change might be implemented. Officers particularly appreciate when departments hold workshops to discuss policies in more detail. Departments did this, for example, on Community Budgets and the Local Government Resource Review.

### Timeliness of consultations

**2.13** Local authorities are keen to participate in consultations, but peaks of consultations and short deadlines make it difficult for them to provide complete and meaningful responses. This is a particular problem where consultations are complex, or interrelated so that the same officers must respond on a similar timescale. Officers also need to plan for consultation to fit within the council's business cycle, and hold discussions at pre-scheduled committee meetings.

**2.14** Many local authority officers considered that the timing, complexity and length of consultations had caused problems in handling the work required to respond properly. The government's code of practice on consultation<sup>16</sup> is clear on the time that departments should allow:

- Consultations should "...normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible."
- Furthermore "If a consultation exercise is to take place over a period when consultees are less able to respond, e.g. over the summer or Christmas break, or if the policy under consideration is particularly complex, consideration should be given to the feasibility of allowing a longer period for the consultation."
- The code provides for the following limited flexibility: "Where a formal consultation exercise is considered appropriate and there are good reasons for it to last for a shorter period, the consultation document should be clear as to the reasons for the shortened consultation period and ministerial clearance for the shorter time frame should be sought."

**2.15 Figure 3**, which analyses the duration of consultations issued by seven departments over two years to January 2012, demonstrates that local authorities' concerns about timeliness of consultations are legitimate. With the exception of consultations published in July 2011, most consultation periods have lasted less than 60 working days. The departments also collectively issued larger numbers of consultation documents in the months before parliamentary recess and holiday periods of Easter, summer and Christmas. Many officials and elected members will have planned holidays during these periods and therefore, recognising planned absences, there will be few or no scheduled meetings bringing elected members together.

**2.16** We also examined the cumulative effect of the number of consultations which are open at any point in time. The number of consultations open in any month has increased over time with particular peaks over the spring, summer/autumn and Christmas/New Year periods.

**2.17 Figure 4** on page 26 shows that over the two years to January 2012, in consultations conducted by the seven departments, 199 consultations (65 per cent) required responses in less than 60 working days. Only 25 consultations (8 per cent) were given 70 working days or longer.

### Feedback from consultations

**2.18** Many local authority officers emphasised the importance of being able to see evidence that their contributions have been considered, particularly if authorities are to continue to respond to consultations despite recent large staff reductions. While a summary of views is normally published with the government's consultation response, the connection between the two can be unclear. Local authority officers would especially like to have explanations of:

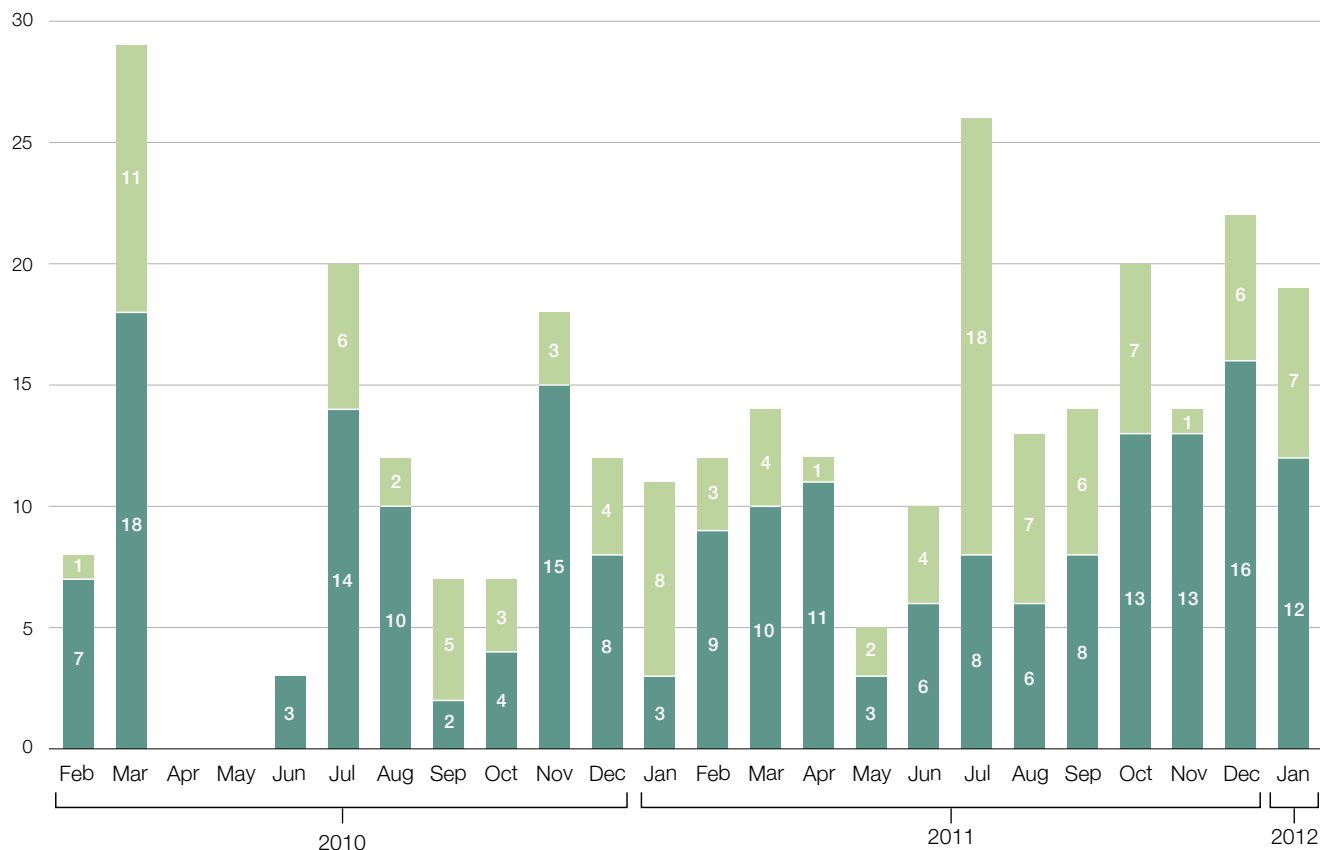
- the scale and strength of either support or opposition specifically from the local government sector;
- the weight attached to local authority evidence and views, especially when it is primarily local authorities that will be responsible for implementation; and
- how any issues of concern to particular areas of the country or sectors of the population have been addressed.

### Figure 3

Consultation documents published by month, two years to January 2012

Most consultation periods have lasted less than the recommended 60 working days, and a large number started just before parliamentary recess and holiday periods

#### Number of consultations



#### Duration of consultation

- 60 working days or more
- Less than 60 working days

#### NOTES

- 1 Figure shows the number of consultation documents issued in each month by the Departments for Communities and Local Government, Education, Work and Pensions, Transport, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Health and the Home Office between February 2010 and January 2012.
- 2 For the purpose of our analysis we have equated 12 weeks to 60 working days, excluding statutory holidays.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of info4local data

**2.19 Case study six** shows an example of feedback (not involving the departments we examined) that provided explicit assurance that a subsequent strategy was grounded in evidence from the consultation on what would work locally.

### Case study six

#### Achieving great art for everyone, Arts Council England

The Arts Council's 10-year strategy for the arts *Achieving great art for everyone* published in 2010, followed extensive consultation with around 2,500 people including representatives of local government. The Council shared views through a range of channels including written consultation responses, online debate, road shows and targeted research.

The Arts Council published a full and independent report on the consultation. As an integral section of the final strategy it summarised what it had learned through the consultation and how the contributions had made a difference to its thinking. The Council also was explicit on why it could not address some of the points raised.

### Figure 4

#### Number of consultations and timescales for response, 2010 to 2012

**More than 300 consultations were issued in two years, 65 per cent of which required responses in less than 60 working days**

Department	Number of consultations	Number of consultations with responses due in under 60 working days	Percentage of consultations with responses due in under 60 working days (%)
Work and Pensions	35	30	86
Communities and Local Government	70	47	67
Transport	48	31	65
Education	40	26	65
Home Office	23	15	65
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	39	25	64
Health	53	25	47
Total	308	199	65

#### NOTES

1 Figure covers consultations between February 2010 and January 2012.

2 60 working days excludes weekends and statutory holidays.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of info4local data.

## Part Three

### Communications that support efficient and effective business

**3.1** The large volume of communications exchanged by central and local government multiplies the impact of even relatively minor errors and lapses in quality. This part of the report assesses how far departments' communications with local government are good quality and whether there is systematic oversight to ensure that communications are consistently effective. We also examine local government's use and perceptions of departments' websites.

**3.2** We evaluated communications against good practice including: clarity, conciseness and clear purpose; planning of communications that are not 'business as usual'; coordination of communications within and across departments; appropriate targeting to avoid wasted effort; and accessible websites that are well targeted.

#### Volume of communications

**3.3** Millions of communications, mainly by email, are exchanged between central and local government each year. In March 2012, some 744,000 emails were sent by departments, their agencies and other bodies to local government; of these, some 272,000 were sent from the main departments (Appendix Two). **Figure 5** overleaf shows a breakdown of the number of emails sent by each department and by their agencies and other bodies to local authorities. Appendix Two also shows that some 611,000 emails were sent by local government to departments, their agencies and other bodies; of these, some 199,000 went to the main departments.

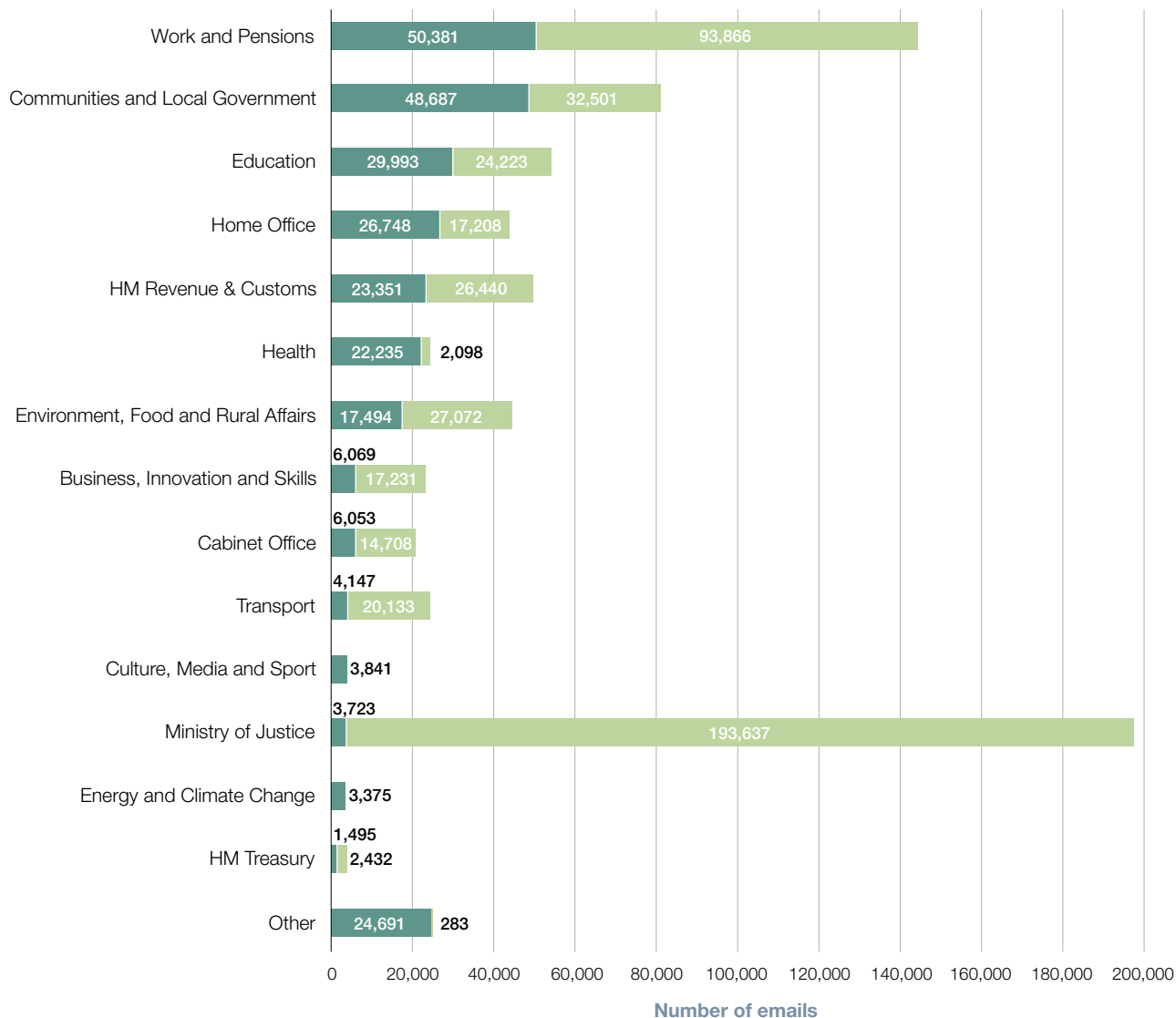
**3.4** Local authorities commented that with a large volume of emails from different sources, it can be difficult to identify what is important and needs action. There is no consistency across departments as to what constitutes statutory guidance, advice and information, and no consistent labelling of document types.

**Figure 5**

Volume of emails sent from central to local government in March 2012, by department

Large numbers of emails are sent to local authorities by both departments and their agencies and other bodies

**Department**



- Main department
- Agencies and other bodies

**NOTES**

- 1 Shows a count of emails sent by each main department, and by its agencies and other bodies, to local government in March 2012.
- 2 Other includes smaller departments and independent central bodies.
- 3 Each recipient counts as one email; multiple addressees are counted as multiple emails.
- 4 The Ministry of Justice, their agencies and other bodies include the National Offender Management Service and Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service. The Ministry pointed out that the large volume of correspondence with local government is part of normal business activities.
- 5 Excludes the Ministry of Defence, security services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and NHS.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of email data

## Quality of communications

**3.5** In our survey of local authority chief executives, the top three unprompted responses to our question about the features of effective communications from central government were: clear and concise, well targeted, and timely.

### Clear and concise

**3.6** Chief executives and local authority officers pointed to many examples of communications from central government that were clear about their purpose and, where relevant, the actions required and deadlines. Local authorities welcome increasing use of plain English guides to accompany consultations.

**3.7** The regular newsletter to local authority chief executives from the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Communities and Local Government was commonly cited as good practice. It contains brief, clear updates on current issues of relevance to local government with links to key documents and consultations. Chief executives considered that these letters covered issues in the right level of detail and were courteous. They save time because they are suitable for forwarding on as an effective communication to others in an authority.

**3.8** Other cited examples included the regular 'Dear colleague' letters, sent to local authorities and health bodies by the Department of Health's Director General for Social Care, Local Government and Care Partnerships, and the Department's quarterly social care bulletins. These bulletins cover information on a large number of issues, but with clear, two- to three-line summaries and links for those who want more detail. Local authorities also commended the clear layout of Audit Commission email communications.

**3.9** Poor signposting in communications wastes time. Email communication is preferred because information can easily be forwarded. However, local authority officers complained that some emails are poorly formatted, for example, referring to 'attached letter' with no indication of the subject, who it is from and whether it requires action. Some described having to go through several links and scrolling through pages of unnecessary text to find the purpose of a communication. While the wasted time caused by a single poorly designed communication to a single recipient may be small, the effect is multiplied where a communication is going to hundreds of local authorities, all repeating the same actions and thought processes to work out the message.

**3.10** **Figure 6** overleaf outlines a suggested email format that could save substantial time and effort if followed consistently.

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**Figure 6**

Suggested format for emailed communications that could save substantial time and effort if followed consistently

- Subject line stating clearly what the communication is about and any deadlines.
- No visible email addresses of other recipients receiving the same email (which any forwarded recipient or Blackberry user has to page through to get to the email text).
- Two or three short sentences on what the communication is about and why it has been sent. Deadlines for actions or responses should appear in bold within this text.
- A reference immediately below this text to all the groups who have been sent the email; e.g. 'all district council chief executives'. This is good practice that the Department of Health has used at the top of its letter communications for years.
- Where there are links or attachments, an explanation immediately before the link or attachment of why the recipient should look at it.

*Source: National Audit Office*

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## Targeting communications

**3.11** Departments can find it difficult to work out who to contact in each local authority because local structures, roles and responsibilities differ widely. Local authorities recognise the continuing difficulty as they change their structures to reduce costs. The chief executive's office is generally the default destination for communications, with the relevant directors of service usually copied in. However, this is not universal. For example, the Department for Education usually directs its communications to directors of children's services. Correspondence may also be directed to the leader of the council and elected members leading on particular subjects. Where this occurs, departments do not always send copies to local authority officers, who may then not pick up quickly on important information.

## Timeliness

**3.12** Often communications from central to local government are expected as part of normal business, or are signalled in earlier communications. To that extent, therefore, timeliness is not an issue.



**3.13** Problems arise with some unplanned communications about untested arrangements. For example, local authorities referred to a communication from the Department of Health about allocations for public health grants for 2012-13, which local authorities would use to plan for responsibilities they would take on from April 2013. The Department wrote to all local authority chief executives on 12 August 2011 asking them and their chief finance officers to work with their local primary care trusts which were preparing a return on public health expenditure due to be submitted by 16 September. Authorities were concerned about the short time frame, particularly given lack of clarity over how the allocations should be costed, or the detail, at that time, of the activities to be transferred. Since publishing public health baseline cost estimates on 7 February 2012, the Department has been engaging closely with local authorities.

**3.14** Timeliness can become an issue despite detailed planning of a change. The blue badge scheme provides parking concessions for people with severe mobility problems. The Department for Transport worked hard to establish the right contacts with local authorities when planning changes in how badges are issued that were designed to improve efficiency and customer service, and to reduce fraud and abuse. The Department held workshops for local authorities in June and July 2011 to explain the changes. In response to feedback, it established communities of practice online for sharing experience, and local authorities have commented positively on this. However, although communications from the supplier began in the summer, some information notes on the more detailed practical aspects of the changes were sent in November 2011, and continued up to 22 December 2011 for a go-live date of 1 January 2012.

### Overseeing communications with local government

**3.15** Arrangements to manage the quality of communications with local government are not consistent across departments. One of the five departments we reviewed, the Department for Transport, provides specific guidance to policy teams on producing effective information for local authorities. The guidance highlights the importance of using plain English summaries, keeping information up-to-date and supported by weblinks, and identifying a named contact for any follow-up.

**3.16** The Department for Education provides guidance on communications with local authorities, in particular on the use of its regular local authority email, through its intranet. The Department of Health has a process to monitor whether communications place an unnecessary burden on local authorities and the NHS, whether they focus on the Department's core priorities and follow a consistent style.

**3.17** The Department for Work and Pensions is the only one of the five departments that we reviewed that has comprehensive and systematic arrangements for coordinating communications of its various sections with local authorities. The arrangements are overseen by the Department's corporate stakeholder team and supported using stakeholder management software. In the other departments, communications are mainly sent directly by separate policy teams, and while coordination can occur through individual initiative and management review, it is not systematic.

### Providing accessible websites

**3.18** A recent Cabinet Office report on progress in improving government websites<sup>17</sup> found that, of the five departments we examined, there was wide variation in satisfaction. The Department for Work and Pensions came top for visitor satisfaction and, along with Health, had the lowest proportion of users reporting that they had "got none of what they wanted".

**3.19** While many officers emphasised that they would not want departments to rely excessively on local authorities picking up information from websites, well laid-out and informative websites were accepted as improving accessibility to information by local government. The Departments for Work and Pensions, Transport, and Communities and Local Government have dedicated local authority landing pages, accessible directly from their homepage or through a web search. **Figure 7** shows that the Departments for Work and Pensions and for Communities and Local Government provide a wide range of ways for local authorities to access information through their websites, while the other three departments' websites have limited functionality specifically to help local authorities. The Work and Pensions website was cited by several local authorities as particularly good, with key named contacts, for example for staff responsible for particular benefits.

**3.20** Local authority officers value dedicated discussion forums, communities of practice and knowledge hubs. As part of the government's broadband delivery programme, local authorities can access a virtual resource centre known as the 'huddle'. Officers who had used it considered it excellent for sharing information, asking questions of peers and government, and receiving real-time responses.

### Coordinating communications with local government

**3.21** The info4local service is a central government web portal with RSS feeds, a Twitter account and an email alert service. It is primarily aimed at local authorities and is intended to provide a one-stop shop for finding relevant information on the websites of government departments, agencies and public bodies. It is run by seven departments: Communities and Local Government (oversight role); Education; Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Health; Home Office; Transport; and Work and Pensions. In 2011-12, info4local cost some £218,000.

17 Cabinet Office, *Reporting on progress: Central Government websites, 2010-11*.

**Figure 7**Features for local authorities from five departmental websites<sup>1</sup>**Departments provide a range of ways for local authorities to access information**

	Department				
	Work and Pensions	Health	Transport	Education	Communities and Local Government
Website areas dedicated to local authority staff and accessible from home page	✓		✓		✓
Can search for local authority specific information on the website					✓
Named contacts provided <sup>2</sup>	✓				
Link to the www.info4local.gov.uk website	✓	✓	✓		✓
Dedicated local authority relevant RSS feeds	✓	✓		✓	✓
Dedicated Twitter feed for local authorities					✓
Local authority specific blogs		✓			✓

**NOTES**

1 The figure records the existence of the features listed.

2 All departments include the names of senior officials, but this is usually restricted to the board members.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of department websites conducted February 2012

**3.22** Nearly 60 departments, agencies and public bodies contribute to info4local. Subscriptions to the email alerts have increased steadily and in March 2012 there were 46,814 subscribers. In 2011, info4local carried out a survey of service users. Of the 1,931 respondents, 56 per cent were from local government. The majority of respondents were very satisfied (54 per cent) or satisfied (42 per cent) with the service. Sixty-six per cent of respondents considered that using info4local saved time when searching for documents and news releases in relation to their job.<sup>18</sup> Respondents said that without info4local they would:

- find it difficult to get all the central government information they need quickly (73 per cent agree or strongly agree); and
- would find it difficult to keep abreast of consultations and deadlines (70 per cent agree or strongly agree).

<sup>18</sup> Seven per cent estimated that the service saved them no time and 27 per cent did not know how much time the service saved them.

# Appendix One

## Methodology

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### Purpose

#### 1 Review of documents

To understand the factors that affect communication between central and local government.

#### 2 Local government interviews

To identify good practice and areas for improvement. To understand the impact of communications and processes in local authorities for managing communications with central government.

#### 3 Survey of local authority chief executives

To obtain a senior local authority perspective on the characteristics of, and barriers to, effective communications between central and local government.

#### 4 Central government interviews

To understand the processes in departments for designing and coordinating communications with local government, and identify any common or best practice.

#### 5 Review of central government websites

To understand and compare how central government departments use websites to share information of relevance to local government.

#### 6 Analyses of central government policy consultations and email traffic

To understand the volume, timing and duration of consultations, and the volume of emails exchanged by central and local government.

### Method

We reviewed documents from central and local government, and reports by others including professional and representative bodies such as the Local Government Association.

We visited 17 councils in England between December 2011 and February 2012. We conducted semi-structured interviews with chief executives, directors and officers. Our sample covered a range of authority types, sizes, locations and service areas.

We emailed a short questionnaire to all 353 local authorities in England. We asked six open questions with free-text answers, allowing respondents to focus on issues of importance to them. We received 56 responses, a response rate of 16 per cent. Questionnaires were completed between December 2011 and February 2012.

We carried out semi-structured interviews with communications and policy staff in five departments with high levels of interaction with local government: Communities and Local Government, Work and Pensions, Health, Transport and Education.

We examined the websites of the five departments to identify key features available.

We analysed the volume, timing and duration of consultations published during 2010 and 2011 and made available through info4local. We analysed the volume of emails exchanged between central and local government in March 2012.

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## Appendix Two

### Volume of communications

#### Figure 8

Number of emails sent by central government departments to local authorities during March 2012

Department	County Councils	District Councils	London Boroughs	Metropolitan Councils	Unitary Authorities	Total
Work and Pensions	3,525	13,684	6,259	13,999	12,914	50,381
Communities and Local Government	5,382	17,697	7,375	8,224	10,009	48,687
Education	6,855	359	5,946	7,649	9,184	29,993
Home Office	2,244	3,279	10,915	6,248	4,062	26,748
HM Revenue & Customs	3,941	3,487	3,214	7,144	5,565	23,351
Health	4,278	4,005	4,292	4,355	5,305	22,235
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	2,880	6,044	2,570	1,858	4,142	17,494
Business, Innovation and Skills	1,040	766	1,311	1,579	1,373	6,069
Cabinet Office	1,029	934	1,830	1,444	816	6,053
Transport	1,371	348	758	568	1,102	4,147
Culture, Media and Sport	952	844	409	852	784	3,841
Ministry of Justice	828	174	1,723	491	507	3,723
Energy and Climate Change	304	708	1,693	374	296	3,375
HM Treasury	259	48	868	184	136	1,495
Other	4,918	5,997	4,441	3,859	5,476	24,691
<b>Total</b>	<b>39,806</b>	<b>58,374</b>	<b>53,604</b>	<b>58,828</b>	<b>61,671</b>	<b>272,283</b>

#### NOTES

- 1 Departments only, excluding agencies and other sponsored bodies.
- 2 Other includes smaller departments and independent central bodies.
- 3 Each recipient counts as one email; multiple addressees are counted as multiple emails.
- 4 Excludes the Ministry of Defence, security services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and NHS.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of email data

**Figure 9**

Number of emails sent by central government, including the central departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies, to local authorities during March 2012

<b>Department</b>	<b>County Councils</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>	<b>Metropolitan Councils</b>	<b>Unitary Authorities</b>	<b>Total</b>
Ministry of Justice	42,899	14,911	45,550	44,427	49,573	<b>197,360</b>
Work and Pensions	11,895	34,646	19,564	39,941	38,201	<b>144,247</b>
Communities and Local Government	6,831	29,460	13,264	13,753	17,880	<b>81,188</b>
Education	13,555	914	9,850	14,306	15,591	<b>54,216</b>
HM Revenue & Customs	4,827	13,157	7,537	13,571	10,699	<b>49,791</b>
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	10,312	12,723	3,865	4,997	12,669	<b>44,566</b>
Home Office	4,726	4,138	15,459	10,848	8,785	<b>43,956</b>
Health	4,641	4,063	5,134	4,647	5,848	<b>24,333</b>
Transport	6,864	4,083	2,535	5,044	5,754	<b>24,280</b>
Business, Innovation and Skills	2,818	4,361	4,719	5,011	6,391	<b>23,300</b>
Cabinet Office	3,275	4,572	4,575	3,933	4,406	<b>20,761</b>
HM Treasury	261	1,362	1,285	405	614	<b>3,927</b>
Culture, Media and Sport	952	844	409	852	784	<b>3,841</b>
Energy and Climate Change	304	708	1,693	374	296	<b>3,375</b>
Other	4,999	6,023	4,509	3,916	5,527	<b>24,974</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>119,159</b>	<b>135,965</b>	<b>139,948</b>	<b>166,025</b>	<b>183,018</b>	<b>744,115</b>

**NOTES**

- 1 The count for each department includes its sponsored agencies and non-departmental public bodies.
- 2 Other includes smaller departments and independent central bodies.
- 3 Each recipient counts as one email; multiple addressees are counted as multiple emails.
- 4 Excludes the Ministry of Defence, security services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and NHS.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of email data

**Figure 10**

Number of emails sent by local authorities to central government departments during March 2012

<b>Department</b>	<b>County Councils</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>	<b>Metropolitan Councils</b>	<b>Unitary Authorities</b>	<b>Total</b>
Work and Pensions	3,811	7,541	5,280	12,651	10,334	<b>39,617</b>
Communities and Local Government	3,328	8,660	5,381	5,417	6,961	<b>29,747</b>
Home Office	1,754	1,573	9,630	5,227	2,732	<b>20,916</b>
Education	4,946	243	3,673	4,949	5,609	<b>19,420</b>
HM Revenue & Customs	2,437	2,386	3,107	5,644	5,362	<b>18,936</b>
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	2,476	3,160	1,882	1,015	2,966	<b>11,499</b>
Health	1,902	619	2,253	2,090	1,992	<b>8,856</b>
Business, Innovation and Skills	935	421	1,562	1,658	1,191	<b>5,767</b>
Cabinet Office	1,121	576	1,882	1,411	720	<b>5,710</b>
Culture, Media and Sport	1,150	1,473	545	1,007	1,054	<b>5,229</b>
Transport	1,759	498	865	595	1,361	<b>5,078</b>
Ministry of Justice	859	210	1,666	502	533	<b>3,770</b>
Energy and Climate Change	255	329	1,876	226	127	<b>2,813</b>
HM Treasury	270	56	990	138	158	<b>1,612</b>
Other	4,796	4,206	3,402	3,326	4,172	<b>19,902</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>31,799</b>	<b>31,951</b>	<b>43,994</b>	<b>45,856</b>	<b>45,272</b>	<b>198,872</b>

**NOTES**

- 1 Core departments only, excluding agencies and other sponsored bodies.
- 2 Other includes smaller departments and independent central bodies.
- 3 Each recipient counts as one email; multiple addressees are counted as multiple emails.
- 4 Excludes the Ministry of Defence, security services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and NHS.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of email data

**Figure 11**

Number of emails sent by local authorities to central government, including the central departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies, during March 2012

<b>Department</b>	<b>County Councils</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>London Boroughs</b>	<b>Metropolitan Councils</b>	<b>Unitary Authorities</b>	<b>Total</b>
Ministry of Justice	43,870	15,542	41,892	44,221	51,296	<b>196,821</b>
Work and Pensions	13,450	18,407	17,822	33,244	29,612	<b>112,535</b>
Communities and Local Government	4,917	17,895	9,374	10,699	14,047	<b>56,932</b>
Education	13,747	847	8,144	13,708	13,677	<b>50,123</b>
HM Revenue & Customs	3,278	9,238	5,828	10,661	8,923	<b>37,928</b>
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	10,538	8,865	2,927	3,729	10,984	<b>37,043</b>
Home Office	3,576	2,095	13,769	8,678	6,026	<b>34,144</b>
Transport	5,020	2,840	1,503	4,396	4,734	<b>18,493</b>
Business, Innovation and Skills	2,063	2,652	3,444	3,818	5,575	<b>17,552</b>
Health	2,122	666	2,955	2,155	2,217	<b>10,115</b>
Cabinet Office	1,676	1,246	2,556	1,794	1,444	<b>8,716</b>
Culture, Media and Sport	1,150	1,473	545	1,007	1,054	<b>5,229</b>
Energy and Climate Change	255	329	1,876	226	127	<b>2,813</b>
HM Treasury	278	245	1,197	178	225	<b>2,123</b>
Other	4,862	4,275	3,476	3,388	4,226	<b>20,227</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>110,802</b>	<b>86,615</b>	<b>117,308</b>	<b>141,902</b>	<b>154,167</b>	<b>610,794</b>

**NOTES**

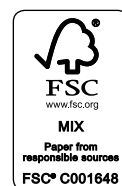
- 1 The count for each department includes its sponsored agencies and non-departmental public bodies.
- 2 Other includes smaller departments and independent central bodies.
- 3 Each recipient counts as one email; multiple addressees are counted as multiple emails.
- 4 Excludes the Ministry of Defence, security services, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and NHS.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of email data









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