



National Audit Office

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Department for Communities and Local Government

# **Central government's communication and engagement with local government**

Detailed methodology

**JUNE 2012**

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## Detailed methodology

**1** This study examined the effectiveness of central government's communication and engagement with local government.

### Document review

**2** We reviewed published and unpublished documents from central and local government including research reports, consultations and supporting documents, newsletters, email communications and guidance. We also reviewed reports by stakeholders including professional and representative bodies such as the Local Government Association. The primary purpose of this review was to inform our understanding of the operational and political context that affects the nature of communication between central and local government and to provide evidence of practice in engagement and communications.

**3** We carried out a desk-based thematic literature review to support our understanding of communications and engagement good practice, with specific reference to communication between central and local government as well as more general communications good practice.

### Semi-structured interviews with central government officials and local government officers

**4** We interviewed central government officials as well as officers in a number of local authorities to understand communications processes and perceptions of central government communications.

### Central government departments

**5** We carried out semi-structured interviews with communications and policy staff in five departments: Communities and Local Government, Education, Health, Transport and Work and Pensions. These five departments were selected on the basis of the amount of money spent by local authorities, and provided by the central departments to local authorities, as an indicator of the likely levels of communication and engagement.

**6** We asked questions to understand the processes in departments for designing and coordinating communications with local government, and identify any common or best practice approaches. These interviews were supplemented with documentary evidence, either from departments or sourced from departmental websites. Notes of the interviews, along with supplementary evidence, were used to analyse communication practices, allowing us to undertake a comparison between departments.

## Local authorities

**7** We sought advice from a number of local authorities on our approach. We piloted the approach with three councils (a district, a London borough and a county) in December 2011. Piloting confirmed that our method provided the evidence we sought. With minor amendments we progressed to main fieldwork in January 2012. Because the changes to the interviews were minimal, we included the three pilot authorities in the main sample.

**8** We conducted semi-structured interviews with staff in strategic roles and in specific business areas, such as children's services and planning, in local authorities, to:

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

We used one topic guide for the strategic interview (most often with the chief executive, occasionally with a nominated other), another for the detailed discussion with staff in business units.

**9** Authorities were selected to ensure a broad coverage across type (county/district/metropolitan/unitary), geography (including rural/urban and region), size (according to a combination of expenditure and population) and deprivation (according to Index of Multiple Deprivation ranking). We wrote to chief executives of the sampled authorities outlining the scope and objectives of the study. We asked them to suggest two to four business areas which they felt would provide good examples of both good and poor communication with central government departments, nominating staff who would be available for interview.

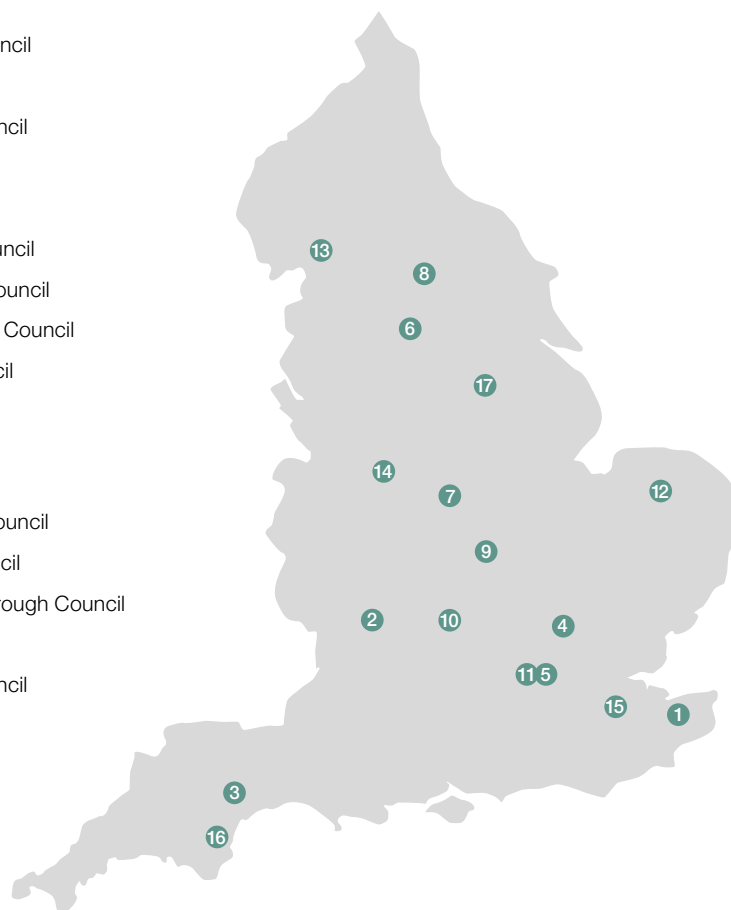
**10** We conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 chief executives or assistant chief executives, and 81 directors, managers and operational staff in 17 authorities between December 2011 and February 2012. At two councils we interviewed the elected mayor or council leader. **Figure 1** shows the distribution of the 17.

**11** Interviews and supplementary evidence provided by interviewees were qualitatively analysed, theming responses to a number of codes identified from an initial review of all interviews. Primary themes were best practice, engagement and knowledge. Secondary themes included timing, relationships and understanding.

**Figure 1**

Councils which participated in our fieldwork

- 1 Canterbury City Council
- 2 Cheltenham Borough Council
- 3 Devon County Council
- 4 Hertfordshire County Council
- 5 Lambeth Council
- 6 Leeds City Council
- 7 Leicestershire County Council
- 8 North Yorkshire County Council
- 9 Northamptonshire County Council
- 10 Oxfordshire County Council
- 11 Richmond upon Thames
- 12 South Holland District and Breckland Councils
- 13 South Lakeland District Council
- 14 Staffordshire county Council
- 15 Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council
- 16 Torbay Council
- 17 West Lindsey District Council



Source: National Audit Office

## Survey of local authority chief executives

**12** We emailed a short questionnaire, and letter outlining the study scope, to all 353 local authorities in England. We carried out the survey to examine the characteristics of, and barriers to, effective communications between central government and local authorities from the perspective of senior local authority personnel. Respondents were also asked to provide examples of good and poor departmental communications or other documents to support their responses. We asked seven open questions, allowing respondents to focus on issues of importance to them around:

- a** effective and ineffective communications from central government departments and agencies;
- b** examples of communications from departments or agencies that are particularly accessible/inaccessible;
- c** examples of good practice in the way the council engages with central government departments or agencies for achieving an effective working relationship; and
- d** any barriers to effective communication between their council and central government departments and agencies.

**13** We consulted the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives on the most effective way to engage chief executives and on the contents of the questionnaire. Before distribution, the questionnaire was also subject to internal quality assurance review and was reviewed by three local authority directors. The survey was publicised in the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives' weekly briefing of 19 December 2011, and a reminder to complete the survey placed in the briefing of 20 January 2012.

**14** We had valid (excluding duplicates and nil responses) returns from 54 different councils, a response rate of 15 per cent. Questionnaires were completed between December 2011 and February 2012. Responses to our survey covered a range of authority types and locations, with proportionately fewer responses from district councils and those in the South East (when compared against population profiles). Returned questionnaires were logged, and the qualitative data sorted by whether they described good or bad examples of communication or described other communications topics of importance to local authorities. We used these survey responses to triangulate our findings from the local authority visits.

**Figure 2**

Number and distribution of responses to our survey of local authority chief executives

Type/location	Number in population	Population (%)	Survey response (%)	Number of survey responses
County	27	8	13	7
London Borough/Other	33	9	15	8
Metropolitan Borough	36	10	19	10
Unitary <sup>1</sup>	56	16	17	9
District	201	57	37	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>101<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>54</b>
North East	12	3	9	5
Yorkshire and the Humber	22	6	6	3
West Midlands	33	9	13	7
London	33	9	15	8
South West	41	12	11	6
North West	41	12	9	5
East Midlands	45	13	9	5
East of England	52	15	17	9
South East	74	21	11	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>54</b>

**NOTES**

1 Includes Isles of Scilly.

2 Totals more than 100 due to rounding.

Source: National Audit Office

## Review of departmental websites

**15** We examined the websites of the five departments we selected: Communities and Local Government, Work and Pensions, Health, Transport and Education. We compared how they make information available to local government through their websites. We did not examine the websites for the agencies of these departments. The purpose of this comparison was to understand how central government makes use of websites to share information of relevance to local authorities and to identify and compare practice between departments.

## Development of illustrative case studies

**16** From the examples of good communications and engagement cited in the chief executive survey and interviews with both officers and officials, we selected six to form the basis of case studies presented within the report. The examples were selected because we felt that they were particularly illustrative of the key findings in this study. These case studies were supported by review of associated published documents and additional documentation provided by the local authorities themselves.

## Analyses of central government policy consultations

**17** We reviewed guidance from central government on good practice in consultation. We analysed the volume, timing and duration of consultations published during 2010 and 2011 and made available through info4local. Our purpose was to understand the volume of consultations, their timing and duration in comparison with good practice guidance published by central government.

## Analysis of email traffic between central government and local authorities

**18** Cable & Wireless Worldwide provides communications services to central and local government including the Government Secure Intranet (GSI) and the local government equivalent (GCSx). The majority of central government uses GSI. We commissioned Cable & Wireless Worldwide to provide data on emails between central government departments and their agencies and non-departmental bodies, independent bodies acting on behalf of central government and local authorities, passing through the main GSI and GCSx mail servers and filtering devices. Cable & Wireless Worldwide provided 31 days of mail data (1 to 31 March 2012). The volume of data flowing between central and local government makes it impractical to extract any more than this.

**19** Cable & Wireless Worldwide provided five fields of information for each email that was sent from central to local government and vice versa: sender and recipient domain names (e.g. communities.gsi.gov.uk), date, time and size. Where an email is sent to multiple addressees then each addressee is counted as a separate email. Data could only be provided for emails sent via the GSi and GCSx mail servers. Any emails where both the sender and recipient use other internet service providers and do not use the GSI are excluded, such as the National Health Service. Information on emails to and from the Ministry of Defence, security services and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was also excluded.

**20** Data from Cable & Wireless Worldwide was cleaned and analysed by National Audit Office analysts using SPSS. The data was cleaned to remove email 'loops' (where automatically generated responses from both recipient and sender generated artificially high traffic) and out of scope organisations such as town and parish councils.

**21** Each email domain was linked to a local authority, central government department or other government organisation. Central government-sponsored organisations, such as executive agencies or non-departmental public bodies, were linked to their appropriate core departments (for example courts, tribunals and probation are linked to the Ministry of Justice). Local government domains were classified according to type of authority (county, district, unitary, metropolitan borough and London Borough).