



National Audit Office

REPORT BY THE  
COMPTROLLER AND  
AUDITOR GENERAL

HC 187  
SESSION 2012-13

13 JUNE 2012

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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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## 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.**