



Comparing for Improvement

Local Government Performance Regimes in England, Scotland and Wales



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Background

Our research analysed the development and impact of local government performance regimes in England, Scotland and Wales. We focused on Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in England; Best Value Audits (BVA) in Scotland; and the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI).

These regimes matter because they have played a pivotal role in recent attempts to drive improvement in public services.

Aims

The research aimed to:

- ❖ Explore how local government performance improvement regimes had developed and identify and explain the similarities and differences between them;
- ❖ Compare the performance of local public services in the three countries; and
- ❖ Test the applicability of our findings to performance regimes in health and social care.

What We Did

- ❖ We analysed the similarities and differences in the local government performance improvement regimes using a framework developed from the literature on risk regulatory regimes. We gathered data from key policy documents and in-depth interviews with a wide range of senior policy makers from central government, audit bodies and local authorities.
- ❖ We compared the performance of local public services through interviewees' perceptions and statistical analysis of comparable statutory performance indicators. And we tested the applicability of our findings to health services and social care with an expert group of senior policy makers and leading researchers.

Findings

- ❖ We found that all three regimes comprised a similar range of mechanisms designed to steer the performance of local authorities, and their precise characteristics depended on the relationships between central and local government and audit bodies (Figure 1).
- ❖ All three were predicated on the assumption that sustained service improvement requires effective leadership of the authority as a whole. However, CPA reflected a much more 'hard edged' approach which used a scoring system to rank authorities and 'name and shame' poor performers. BVA and the WPI were tailored to local context and avoided explicit performance comparisons.

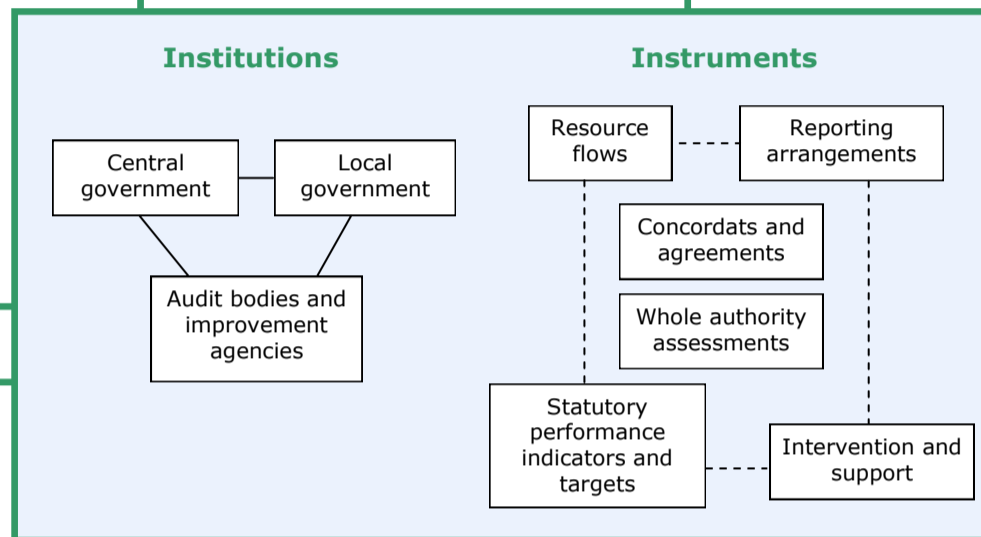


Figure 1 The Local Government Performance Framework

	Comprehensive Performance Assessment (England)	Best Value Audits (Scotland)	Wales Programme for Improvement
Improvement	Corporate capacity and leadership	Corporate capacity and leadership	Corporate capacity and leadership
Motivation	Competitive	Semi-competitive	Non-competitive
Behaviour	Externally driven (challenge to stimulate and support local change agents)	Externally initiated but jointly driven (aim is to reach agreement on areas for improvement)	Internally driven (change depends on local ownership and action)
Accountability	Ministers, public and local politicians	Public and local politicians	Local politicians
Intervention in cases of poor performance	Formal, imposed, public and highly orchestrated	Formal, imposed and public	Reluctant and, as far as possible, consensual and informal

Figure 2 Key Characteristics and Theories of Improvement

- ❖ The regimes embodied contrasting theories of motivation (Figure 2). Policy makers in England believed that improvement required robust external challenge, but their counterparts in Scotland and Wales emphasized the importance of local ownership of the need to change.
- ❖ All three regimes were credited with encouraging improvement, particularly in poorly performing councils. Performance indicators showed few significant differences between countries in rates of service improvement in many areas, including housing, waste management, leisure and culture, planning and highways maintenance.
- ❖ There was little evidence of policy transfer between countries, but signs that all three were increasingly focusing on the effectiveness of networks of local service providers rather than treating local authorities in isolation.

Find out more...



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