

LEISURE

Starring role for culture programme

Joined-up data and improved training have been key to boosting London's cultural performance, as **Robert Bullard** explains

London might have a reputation as an international arts capital, but until 2007 the performance of its 33 councils' cultural services was a long way short of the mark.

"It came as a bit of a shock that our comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) scores [for culture] were lower than all other UK regions," says Sue Thiedeman, manager of London's Cultural Improvement Programme (LCIP), which was set up to tackle the issue by the regional improvement and efficiency partnership, Capital Ambition.

The £500m LCIP started in January 2008 and was originally scheduled to last 18 months, but has been extended. Its work centres on improving the supply, quality and use of data — so that officers and councillors are better able to make the case for cultural services — and providing peer support, self-assessment and training.

"London Councils had lots of data but it was not joined up," says Ms Thiedeman, who is seconded to the programme from Redbridge LBC. "It was inwardly focused — for the needs of managers — but no use for comprehensive area assessment. We didn't have the evidence base that other services had, for identifying needs and measuring impact."

In fact, the data and other challenges the sector faces are common across the country. And in response the Improvement & Development Agency has set up cultural improvement programmes in other English regions.

The first to benefit was the East Midlands, followed by London. Now there are also cultural improvement programmes in the East of England and West Midlands.

This is "sector-led improvement", explains Martyn Allison, the national cultural adviser at the IDeA. "We have been trying to tell the [cultural] sector that, while they are OK in their own right, they have got to take more responsibility against what matters for councils: showing how culture can help promote economic development, health, community safety and other issues," says Mr Allison.

LCIP started its work with a transformational programme for London's libraries, which was reckoned to be the weakest service, says Ms Thiedeman.

London's councils, she reveals, spend several times more per head on their libraries than other councils, but they are not particularly efficient, and user satisfaction levels are lower. In addition, few councils make libraries a priority. Only eight London councils prioritise the arts in their local area agreements, and even fewer — two — focus on museums and libraries.

"All the councils have community cohesion, young people and other indicators as part of their local area agreements, but very few have prioritised the arts, or museums and libraries," says Ms Thiedeman.

"For many councils, culture and sport is the icing on the cake. They are not 'mission critical'," says Mr Allison. This and other factors also make the services vulnerable to cutbacks.

Ms Thiedeman says: "Museums are out on a limb, which makes it easy to cut their budgets. They needed to raise their profile, and an evaluation of what we have been doing suggests that this has happened."

One of the most dramatic improvements in performance as a result of LCIP — to which each participating council makes a contribution of £2,500 — has been at Merton LBC. In the CPA in 2005 its cultural services were awarded one star. This rose to two stars after



STATISTICS

Improvement in CPA scores (number of London councils)

Culture score (stars)	2006	2007	2008
4	1	3	7
3	9	10	14
2	22	20	12
1	1	0	0
Total	33	33	33

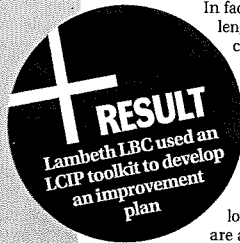
- » Additional funding secured since start-up: £325,000 (Capital Ambition) and £225,200 (cash/in-kind match funding from other sources)
- » 50% of London councils' museums passed through an improvement programme
- » 60 people trained in preparation for their CAA
- » 50 council/other officers attend a cultural improvement group

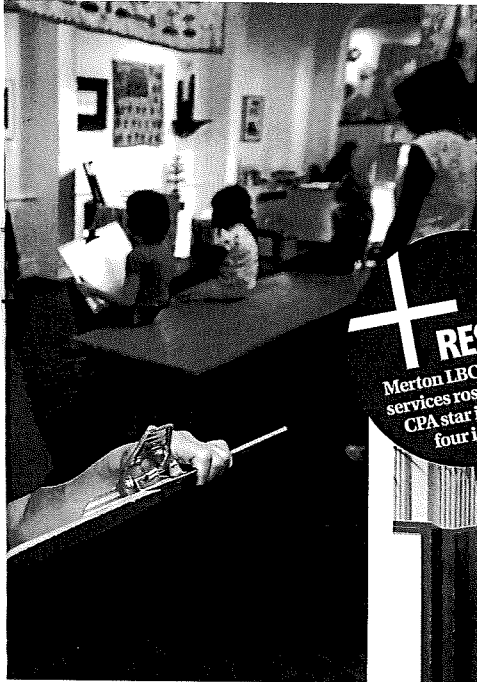
an inspection, and four stars in 2008.

"Support for the move from two stars to four stars came from London's CIP," says Christine Parsloe, the council's leisure and culture development manager.

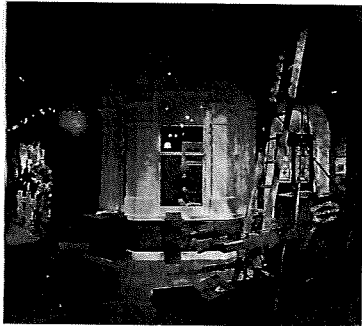
She praises three of the programme's activities — self-assessment, peer learning and access to dedicated training courses — as particularly valuable for Merton.

Self-assessment with the council's parks and open spaces team, involving staff from all lev-





RESULT
Merton LBC's cultural services rose from one CPA star in 2005 to four in 2008



Find out more

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els, was "extremely valuable," says Ms Parsloe. "Some staff started with a lot of self-doubt, but they were surprised to get praise and to hear how good they were. There was a lot of learning and it was very valuable."

Lack of confidence also affected staff willingness to attend training courses, she continues, but LCIP's dedicated courses changed their attitudes. "By putting them with their peers from across London it means it is not frightening for them to go along," says Ms Parsloe.

And she is equally positive about the value of peer learning that was undertaken with the corresponding department at Bexley LBC. "Talking to colleagues in other councils who were doing it, rather than inspectors who did it some time ago, was really valuable," she says.

She believes that the differences in cultural services compared with other council departments — the way it is funded, the fact that it works across council departments and with the third sector, and that staff require a lot of creativity — explains why it has benefited from the tailored support of LCIP.

But Merton is not the only council to have

benefited. Indeed, one of LCIP's greatest successes is the high level of participation by all London boroughs: only four are not taking part. "The timing of the programme was right, there has been huge buy-in," says Ms Thiedeman. "All London councils had to rise to the new CPA challenge, which was a driver for getting them to engage."

She adds: "Because the programme has had success winning additional money for further work, we got more councils on board, which built our capacity."

Ms Parsloe agrees: "With so many councils taking part, there are more opportunities for learning and benefiting from one another. You get out what you put in. It's self-perpetuating."

LCIP's other activities have included seminars for councillors, to help them make the case for culture in regeneration projects (learning from the redevelopment of King's Cross and other projects), and a self-assessment culture and sport toolkit, which Lambeth LBC used to prepare for an inspection and to develop an improvement plan.

But there have been challenges in delivering

LCIP's impressive results (see box). The biggest, says Ms Thiedeman, is that the partner agencies — Sport England, the Arts Council and Museums, Libraries and Archives — work to annual budgets, so LCIP does not know in advance their future contributions.

Another challenge is getting the right relationship with councils. "LCIP relies on the London boroughs to input: we don't want to impose ourselves. We involve them, and that's why it's working."

London's CIP is now leading the way, and its approach is shaping what is promoted to other regions, concludes Ms Thiedeman. "London has been a tremendous success story. The region was so far behind and now is a real gem," says Mr Allison. "I have nothing but praise."

Next week

Infrastructure planning

If you have an example of best practice email: john.camm@emap.com

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Richmond upon Thames LBC's Orleans House Gallery; Karate was one of the activities at Merton LBC's Cultural Olympiad launch; Wimbledon Library; Redbridge Museum