



2017 – 2022

Supported by:



Contents

Forward	2
A vision for town and parish councils	3
Context	5
Delivering the strategy	7
The building blocks of the national improvement strategy	9
Councils: raising the standard	10
Officers: professional development	11
Councillors: democratic leadership	12
Performance	14
Proposed work programme 2017-2020	17
Acknowledgements	18

Forward

From Ken, LGA, DCLG, SLCC

To be completed once strategy is approved

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A vision for town and parish councils

This improvement strategy has been put in place with the aim of supporting all local councils to meet their potential. The Improvement and Development Board partners have a shared vision for how local councils can make a positive contribution to their communities and a shared view of the responsibilities for delivering improvement. The aim of this vision statement is to act as a starting point for greater discussion on the role of local councils, how they can best serve their communities and what can be achieved through the improvement of this most local tier of local government.

Roles and responsibilities

- Local councils are responsible for their own performance and improvement as corporate bodies and for the performance of their councillors and staff.
- Local councils are accountable to their local communities.
- Local councils are able to set and meet their own standards and ambitions.
- The role of the IDB partners is to build support and programmes that help councils to meet their own standards and ambitions. These programmes also constructively challenge councils to meet their potential and to continuously improve over time.
- The IDB partners also set a vision for the sector, based on the ambitions and aspirations of local councils.

The shared vision

All local councils have the potential to deliver benefit to their communities through the activities they undertake. Local councils also vary dramatically in terms of finances, size of population and types of activities they undertake. The following themes define the potential that all councils have to make a positive difference. Councils may choose to fulfil one or all of these roles.

Service deliverer

Through an extensive range of discretionary powers local councils provide and maintain a variety of important and visible local services which can make a huge contribution to their communities, for example, providing local transport solutions, supporting the local economy and businesses, improving the visual appeal of the area, increasing community safety, contributing to arts, culture and leisure provision, managing parks and open spaces, or help meeting health and social care needs. There are a wide range of ways these services may be delivered. They may be directly delivered and managed by the council, be devolved from another tier of government, be delivered by another organisation commissioned by the council, or the council may be contracted to deliver the service by another organisation.

Culture creator

The spirit of a local community is often visible in the range of activities and opportunities for local people to come together and participate in cultural, community-focused, and

recreational activities. These activities can include fetes, street parties, sporting clubs, youth groups, seasonal events, community hubs, parks and play areas. These cultural activities, so essential to the wellbeing and quality of life of millions of citizens, can be delivered by local councils through a number of means. The council may give their time, expertise, resources, or coordinate local activity. Council may also provide local venues, facilities, build networks and support, or provide grants to local groups who deliver these activities.

Place shaper

Through their role in the planning system, particularly since the introduction of neighbourhood planning, local councils have the ability to shape future physical development within their communities. On top of this, through the management or ownership of local assets, whether land, property or through working with local land/property owners, councils are protecting the heritage and history of their areas as well as shaping the future of their communities in a very tangible way through local spaces and buildings.

Builder of community resilience

Councils can support communities to build their capacity and resilience by encouraging people to get more involved in local issues. They can do this by working with individual residents, local groups and organisations, local businesses, and other parts of the public sector. This may be in response to a challenge such as coordinating responses to flooding, setting up foodbanks, or campaigning on a local issue. The council is also well placed to see the potential for improvement in a local community and coordinate a community activity, for example registering local assets of community value, coordinating volunteers, or community initiatives that bring together different local people and groups. Councils may undertake this role directly, or they can indirectly facilitate community participation by providing the conditions it needs to thrive through supporting other local activity or organisations, providing encouragement, information and advice as well as giving grants to local groups.

Democratic and accountable

Local councils share many characteristics with local community groups, charities or active citizens, but their nature as the first tier of government for their communities makes them unique and distinct. Through their democratic mandate, ability to raise a precept and the legislation that governs the transparency of their processes and finances, they hold a unique position and legitimacy within their communities. The best local councils go above and beyond their legal obligations, demonstrating efficiency and transparency in all their work and continuously seeking opportunities to improve and develop even further.

Context:

This strategy document has been produced by the Improvement and Development Board and is intended as a guidance document for the partner organisations of this board, all of whom have come together voluntarily to play a part in achieving improvements for the sector. This document exists alongside these organisations' more detailed strategies, business plans and other strategic objectives.

The Improvement & Development Board

The Improvement & Development Board (IDB) was established in 2013 to develop the strategy for, and oversee the operation of, improvement and development initiatives in the local council sector in England.

The core aims of the IDB are to:

- Support County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs), SLCC branches and County Training Partnerships (CTPs) by providing strategic direction and a forum for discussion, consultation and collaboration for improvement and development initiatives.
- Engage with external stakeholders, including central government departments and the Local Government Association, on improvement and development issues affecting local councils.
- Improve the quality of local councils to ensure that they serve their communities effectively.
- Develop and promote training and qualifications for the sector to ensure quality and consistency.
- Develop a sustainable funding model for sector improvement and development initiatives.

The secretariat and the lead officer to the IDB is provided by NALC

The IDB is a practitioner body whose leadership and members will have professional experience of improvement and development initiatives and/or be responsible for their delivery and/or monitoring within their organisations:

- Chair: Independent and appointed by the Board
- NALC: 3 representatives
- SLCC: 3 representatives
- County Officers: 1 representative, elected by annual ballot of all County Officers
- SLCC branches: 1 representative
- Other stakeholders: 1 representative from each organisation to be invited as appropriate, currently:
 - Department for Communities & Local Government
 - Local Government Association

When it was established the IDB took on the strategic oversight of the Quality Council Scheme, subsequently the Local Council Award Scheme, and National Training Strategy. The National Training Strategy was first set up in 2001 and was most recently updated in 2012; this version of the strategy was intended to cover the period 2012-2015. The ending of the National Training Strategy presented the board with a number of options and opportunities. The board wished to be ambitious and to implement a new improvement strategy for town and parish councils

A new improvement strategy

The IDB undertook to set up an improvement strategy for the sector that would include, but not be limited to, the programmes currently under the National Training Strategy and the Local Council Award Scheme. The aim of the strategy would be to bring together existing work streams so that they complement each other and are seen and delivered as a single offer. This strategy would shape a vision for the sector into or beyond the next five years. It should be ambitious and include programmes or themes that have not been delivered before. It could also include a process of better describing and defining the range of improvement activities that takes place across the country, such as supporting councils in difficulty.

Developing the strategy

A period of consultation and development was needed to ensure that the new strategy truly reflected the needs and aspirations of local councils. *This process is still underway. When the strategy is in its final form this process will be summarised rather than provide precise dates/actions. But it includes:*

Initial survey; working groups made up of councillors, clerks, county officers and national stakeholders; first round of consultation with SLCC NEC, Smaller Councils Committee, Larger Councils Committee; NALC Executive and NALC National Council; second round of consultation with councils and county associations; sign off process with NALC, SLCC, DCLG, LGA

Delivering the strategy

Drawing on theories of system change¹ a set of principles for how all programmes will be delivered have been developed:

Planning for new improvement programmes

Understand needs and assets

The starting point for any new piece of work should be that there is a clear need. In order to understand that need or demand, the Board will consult with relevant individuals in councils, the relevant organisations within the sector as well as other stakeholders such as government and principal councils. The Board will also seek to gather insight into what assets, strengths and other initiatives already exist that might support the change that any new programme seeks to make.

Engage multiple actors

The planning phase of any new piece of work will seek to involve as many different people and organisations as possible. In this way all new programmes will be based on the extensive knowledge and understanding held by councils, county associations, and national partners

Map the system or network

The Board will seek to understand how any new initiative fits into the wider context facing local councils from legislation, regulations, the national policy context, to other existing improvement and development programmes. This will ensure that any new work programme is relevant and complements existing support programmes.

Delivering programmes for improvement

Do it together

The strategy will recognise that all work must be delivered in partnership with space for collaboration at all levels. The Improvement and Development Board embodies this through its own nature as a multi-stakeholder group. Any work programme delivered within the new strategy will allow councils, councillors and clerks to shape the work, and will encourage collaboration between the different organisations involved in local delivery of the programmes.

¹ Insert references

Distribute leadership

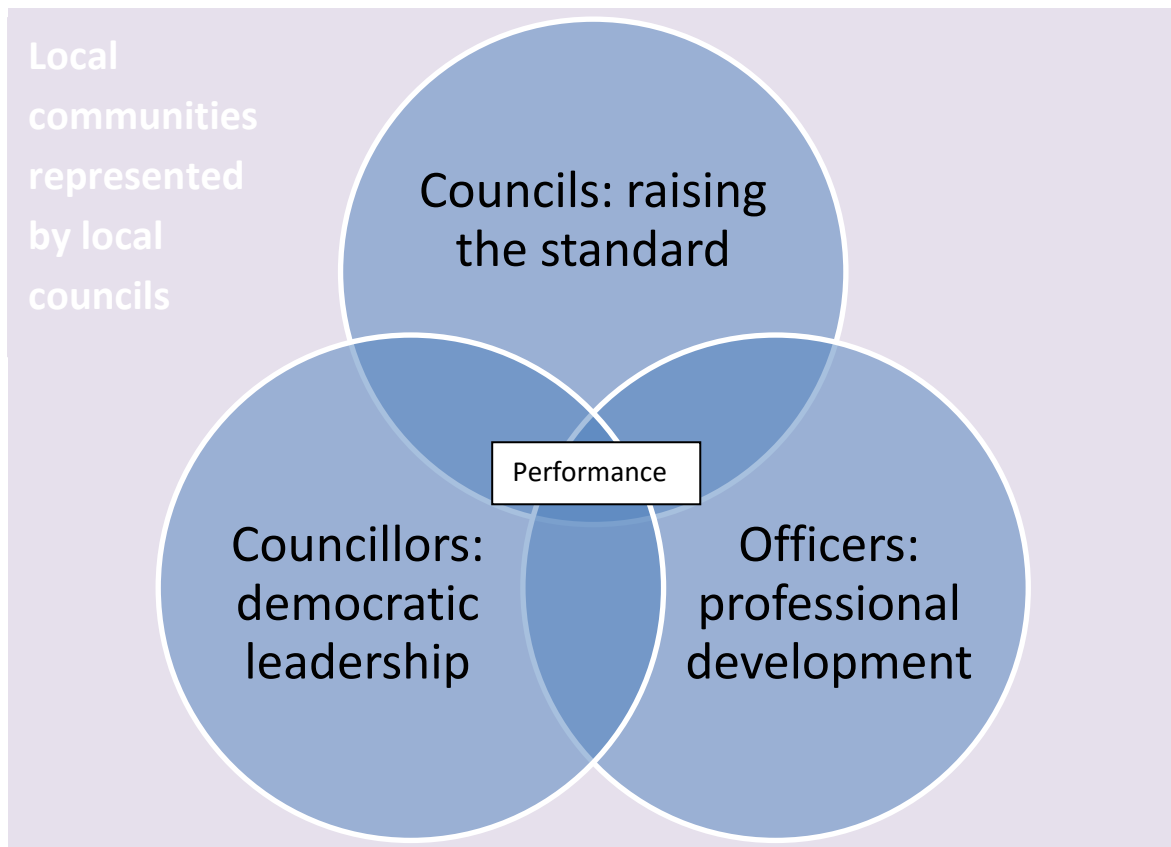
The strategy will reflect the nature of the sector where leadership, both personal and organisational, occurs at all levels of the system. In the same way all improvement programmes will ensure that responsibility and power are 'distributed' throughout organisations and networks.

Foster a learning culture

A learning culture in this sense is one that encourages the generation of ideas, experimentation and problem-solving. The strategy will be open and learn from what others are doing, whether they are peers, experts, or academics and will adapt its approach in response to what is learnt, both little and often, and through major re-alignments where called for. It will seek solutions to change and challenge, not blame.

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The building blocks of the national improvement strategy:



Councils: raising the standard

Local Council Award Scheme

The Local Council Award Scheme exists to celebrate the successes of the very best local councils, and to provide a framework to support all local councils to meet their full potential. All local councils want to serve their local communities and make a real difference to the lives of the people that live there. This scheme offers councils the opportunity to show that they meet the standards set by the sector, assessed by their peers, and to put in place the conditions for continued improvement.

The scheme was created in 2014 and is managed on behalf of local councils by the Improvement and Development Board (IDB).

Councils can apply for an award at one of three levels.

- The **Foundation Award** demonstrates that a council meets requirements for operating lawfully and according to standard practice.
- The **Quality Award** demonstrates that a council achieves good practice in governance, community engagement and council improvement.
- The **Quality Gold Award** demonstrates that a council is at the forefront of best practice and achieves excellence in governance, community leadership and council development.

The scheme sets out criteria to meet at each level covering selected aspects of the council's work. Councils can seek to progress through the tiers over time thereby raising standards. Councils of any size can aspire to an award appropriate for their budget and level of activity.

The Local Council Award Scheme is a form of peer review. Councils are reviewed by experienced peers through the work of local accreditation panels. The aim of this accreditation process is to be as simple, efficient and flexible as possible. It also seeks to ensure that every council that wishes to take part in the scheme is able to, and is assessed in a reasonably consistent way.

To support transparency, every award level has a requirement for certain information to be published online (plus some information that does not need to be published). In all instances the council confirms that the required documents, information and conditions are in place (whether published or not) by resolution in public at a full council meeting.

The whole scheme, including the content and accreditation process, will be reviewed every year.

The Improvement and Development Board oversees all changes to the scheme.

Officers: professional development

Local councils benefit from officers who have the knowledge, skills and understanding essential for the wide range of activities involved in their role. It is vital that councils appoint officers that they can trust to deliver appropriate advice and to manage the implementation of strategic decisions.

The chief officer of a council serving a community of any size is a professional employee requiring management, organisational and communication skills and an understanding of the law, administrative procedures, the planning system, financial management and community engagement. The aim is to ensure that a programme of professional development tailored specifically to the needs of people who work with local councils is in place from induction to higher education and continuing professional development.

Following extensive consultation with County Associations and members of the SLCC in 2012, a set of [Occupational Standards](#) for the chief officers of local councils was drawn up. The aim was to establish a framework providing an overview of the chief officer's role thereby ensuring that induction training, CiLCA and higher level qualifications covered the extensive territory at an appropriate level. These standards therefore inform the following professional development opportunities falling within the scope of the strategy:

- The Board supports induction training and CPD courses delivered by County Associations and the Society of Local Council Clerks.
- The Board is responsible for CiLCA (Certificate in Local Council Administration) established in 2001, regularly updated and re-launched in 2015 as a Level 3 qualification accredited and awarded by Ascentis. CiLCA is administered by the SLCC.
- The Board takes a strategic overview of the higher education programme in Community Governance at Levels 4 and 5, owned and delivered by the SLCC.

These are mature programmes with in-built flexibility allowing for review and enabling them to evolve to meet the sector's changing needs. This strategy focuses on new ideas. The Board will therefore:

- consider developing the occupational standards and obtaining formal recognition by the appropriate agency
- develop recognised apprenticeship and internship programmes operating alongside the qualifications framework to bring young people into the profession
- consider developing a Level 3 qualification for Responsible Financial Officers, possibly similar to a unit of CiLCA
- support the revalidation of Community Governance by a new university and the development of the Community Governance programme to Level 6 leading to a degree
- commission postgraduate research projects involving experienced practitioners and helping to develop leaders in the field.

Councillors: democratic leadership

Across local councils and all organisations involved in the support and development of these councils, the fundamental importance of support, guidance and training for councillors is widely recognised. This improvement strategy considers what can be provided within existing resources and powers.

It is important to note that the Improvement and Development Board and the organisations that sit on the Board receive no core funding for delivering or supporting councillor training. This strategy must then be mindful that the timeframes and scale of any programmes will need to be delivered in a way that is financially sustainable for the Board and for those delivering local training.

The strategy recognises the central role that county associations play in delivering training for town and parish councillors, plus the skills, knowledge and expertise that county associations have developed. All county associations already deliver training for councillors and this is increasingly becoming an important source of income for them. Any work undertaken by the Improvement and Development Board partners should be with the aim of supporting local training and to help ensure its future sustainability.

Support for trainers and county associations

Councillor training packs - A core set of materials for those delivering councillor training will be provided and regularly updated to help trainers continue to provide high quality training to councillors, and allow for a balance of consistency in training with local flexibility. This resource will help county associations when designing local training, with an emphasis to tailoring content to the local situation. For example extra councillor induction training after elections, or focussing on neighbourhood planning if that is a timely issue in the region.

Support for trainers – One of the keys aims of the Improvement and Development Board is to develop and promote training. Supporting county associations and their councillor trainers is fundamental to this and a new support offer will be developed in consultation with county associations.

Guidance for councillors

Booklets and/or workbooks - Currently there are two booklets produced for councillors by the Improvement and Development Board: The Good Councillors Guide and Being a Good Employer. These are very popular – over 40,000 electronic and hard copy guides are accessed by councils each year. Given this demand there seems to be scope to produce more booklets on topics that are particularly important or timely. A further option may be to consider changing the format to be more interactive than the guides currently produced for town and parish councillors. This would also make them more versatile, for example

they could be training tools for local councillor trainers, and could be the basis of any future online learning tools.

Online learning

There is a recognised demand for an online learning tool for councillors. Any possible future resource of this nature will need to be delivered in a way that is financially sustainable and that complements existing guides and training. In particular it should be designed to complement rather than replace face to face training delivered by county associations.

Additional possible support offers

Member development charter - adapting the LGA's approach of a 'member development charter' to the needs and resources of the sector might be a useful additional support offer. This might be a stand-alone, self-assessed kite mark or could be integrated into the local council award scheme criteria – similar to the 12 CPD point requirement for clerks.

Leadership development - NALC recently worked with LGA providing leadership development programmes for town and parish councillors. The feedback from councillors on this course was very positive and NALC will continue to work with the LGA to consider possible joint programmes of this nature. In addition, NALC has provides an annual event called Councillor Horizons – aimed at encouraging more councillors to get involved in NALC and/or their local county associations.

Promoting councillor training - The Improvement and Development Board does not have the authority to impose mandatory councillor training, but through its work can help ensure that councillor training becomes the norm for the sector. All board partners are committed to promoting councillor training and development through their work and communications with councils and councillors.

Councillor induction – the support, information and training a new councillor receives makes a big impact, introducing new councillors to good practice and to the benefits of undertaking training. Good practice in this area already exists, for example the Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils have produced dividers for clerks to encourage them to provide the most useful information to new councillors and that this product has been successful in a number of county areas. The Board may consider in future if this could be supported and/or grown to a national offer.

Being a good employer – The Improvement and Development Board produces and regularly updates the guide to 'being a good employer'. The board will consider what further guidance or initiatives would best enable councillors to better understand their role and responsibilities, to help the recruit, retain and support the development of the best possible staff in their councils.

Performance

High performance

This strategy has laid out a vision for town and parish councils, illustrating the Improvement and Development Board's shared aspirations for the national improvement strategy. The underlying principles that will guide ongoing and future work will ensure that this vision is enshrined in all national improvement initiatives and that these initiatives will be sensitive and relevant to the needs of councils. The programmes that the new strategy will oversee all aim to incorporate these principles, and to support councils to meet their full potential.

And so finally, this strategy concludes with a proposal for how the vision might be translated into reality, how to define what a council achieving its potential can deliver and to ensure that all the work is grounded in the real experiences of local councils.

Going for gold – with a growing number of councils accredited as Quality Gold in the Local Council Award Scheme how do we learn from them and share these examples of best practice? It would be possible to build up case studies of these councils' experiences, outcomes and to hear about their improvement journeys. This would help understand what impact they are making for their local communities, and consider what future support offers might help more councils achieve this level of performance.

Delivering the vision – the shared vision for town and parish councils provides a basis for this strategy, and could be strengthened through finding examples of councils that bring each heading to life: service deliverer, culture creator, place shaper, builder of community resilience, democratic and accountable. There may also be scope in working with newly formed town or parish councils to explore if and how they are making a difference to their communities in the ways described.

These two areas of work will likely overlap at times, but between them the aim would be to provide some real examples of current high performance of town and parish councils.

Poor performance

The Improvement and Development Board recognise that the greatest improvement in the sector is achieved when those councils that are in the most danger of poor performance, or are currently performing poorly acknowledge that this is the case and that they need to seek help. So it is vital that what is available to assist them is clearly explained and the benefits easy to understand. However, it is the first step of realising that help is needed and commencing the process that is the most difficult as many of those authorities will be the most out of touch with the centre, least receptive to the message and hardest to reach and are least likely to acknowledge that there is an issue.

The role of County Associations - It is important to highlight the key role that County Associations play in supporting local councils and that many County Associations already play a proactive and vital role in identifying poor performing councils and working to improve them. It is clear that any future work in this area will need to be developed in consultation with them. County Associations have a unique relationship with the local councils in membership, and their support will be essential to deliver the objectives of this strategy.

Defining poor performance - there is a general consensus that poor performance occurs when a council fails to comply with statutory and financial requirements and establish positive relationships. Evidence for this arises from

- a. Qualified audit and accounts
- b. Unlawful procedures and decision-making
- c. Serious conflict involving the council, councillors and staff
- d. Serious conflict with community groups
- e. Other incidents of law-breaking

Much harder – if not impossible – to quantify are lost opportunities to deliver local services in a way that will benefit local populations. For example, some councils have little ambition or capacity to make improvements in what they deliver and to consider new ideas and sources of funding. It also includes the poor use of existing resources to deliver services, gain income or spend resources to the best effect i.e. get best value for money. While the IDB recognises this as a serious issue for the sector, the focus of this strategy will be on councils showing evidence from the above list.

What support currently exists for underperforming councils? - This varies across county associations but can include:

- Training for councillors, chairmen and clerks
- Telephone advice line for councillors, chairmen and clerks
- Web based written help desk for councillors, chairmen and clerks
- On site mentoring and support

- HR dispute resolution
- Financial mentoring
- Best practice guides
- Events and conferences
- NALC legal advice for councils
- SLCC advice for clerks
- Internal audit support

While it is recognised that many councils may not agree that they are performing poorly and/or may not seek support, it seems that the level of awareness of what support is available for those who do agree they need it is low. The Board would like to consider bringing together a list of services that councils worried about their performance and looking for help can use to help encourage take up of this support.

What new or different support would help poor performing councils?

There are still big questions about our relationship with poor performing councils. The Improvement and Development Board may wish to consider and/or consult on these over the lifetime of the new strategy.

Poor performance baseline survey - Undertake a baseline survey with the aim of estimating the number of councils that fall into the category of poor performance demonstrated by evidence from the list above. This could start as a pilot in a number of county associations to begin with to help understand the practicalities and resource implications of this approach. The benefits of this could be:

- To give an indication of the prevalence of underperformance in the sector
- To better understand if the suggested poor performance indicators are the right measures
- If the baseline survey is a success then it could be repeated at regular intervals

Identify poor performance – For example the SAAA may identify if it is possible to require external auditors to share the names of councils that receive qualified accounts. This list would help target support to these councils in a way that is not resource intensive. Plus, to ask SAAA to coordinate an annual meeting with IDB partner organisations, SAAA and the auditors for the sector. This would help raise awareness of sector wide issues and help develop support to address them.

Direct action in the case of poor performance – A framework of communication, support and direct intervention in the case of identified poor performance could be developed. This would allow councils to access the support they need if they experience difficulties. It would also show a commitment by all involved in supporting local councils to reducing the risk to public money and to the reputation of all local councils through poor performance.

Proposed work programme 2017-2020

This strategy document has been produced by the Improvement and Development Board and is intended as a guidance document for the partner organisations of this board, all of whom have come together voluntarily to play a part in achieving improvements for the sector. This document exists alongside these organisations' more detailed strategies, business plans and other strategic objectives.

So this document does not lay out a detailed work programme. This section of the strategy describes key delivery dates for updates and milestones relating to the programmes overseen by the Board. It does not describe the day to day work of delivering the programmes such as project management, communications and administration, which would be covered by the organisations delivering the work. It will be for the Board to decide the appropriate time frames and milestones for consultation and launch of any new programmes described in this strategy so that it fits within the capacity and time frames of the organisations involved in the delivery of this work.

Key events and milestones:

Regularity	Activity
Quarterly	Improvement and Development Board meetings CiLCA Operations Group meetings
Annual	Review and update of Local Council Award Scheme Update Good Councillors Guide
Bi-annual	Consider need for update of Being a Good Employer Consider need for update of Councillor Training packs

Acknowledgements

NALC and SLCC both contributed staff time to the development of this strategy. The board would like to thank all those who contributed. On top of this the board would like to acknowledge everyone who contributed to working groups that helped develop the councillor training and poor performance sections of this report:

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Deborah White	Avon Association of Local Councils
Paul Milner	Oswestry Town Council

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