

TOWARDS EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN
Sector-led improvement and support in children's services
Children's Improvement Board Bulletin 9

27 January 2012

SECTOR-LED IMPROVEMENT AND SUPPORT IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Welcome to bulletin nine from the Children's Improvement Board (CIB). This bulletin provides updates on progress in developing and implementing a sector-led improvement system for children's services.

CIB is a partnership board set up by the Local Government Association (LGA), the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), and SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) supported by the Department for Education (DfE). It is a direction setting and decision-making group that is responsible for the overall delivery of a new programme to develop a sector-led improvement system for children's services.

More details about the sector-led system can be found in previous bulletins available on our website:

http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/improvement-and-support/-/journal_content/56/10161/3143339/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

ROUND UP OF RECENT ACTIVITY

1. Devolution of sector led improvement to regions

Local authorities working in regions have taken a major step in terms of signing up to sector led improvement and setting up work plans for the rest of this year to support improvement in children's services. Each region has been asked to give priority to peer challenge and providing "early support" to councils who may be in difficulty. Funding has been allocated to them for this financial year and we expect that more funding will be available next year.

The drive for this improvement work is coming from local authorities themselves. All local authorities are asked to open up their self assessment processes to peer challenge, but how this happens will differ from place to place. It is important that everyone gets involved in sector led improvement, but it is also important that peer challenge moves forward in a way which works for local authorities in each region and enables everyone to learn. For example the East of England has set up a director of children's services challenge panel to scrutinise local authority self- assessments. In London local authorities are pairing up to challenge each other, based on their "top three" performance challenges and reviewing progress after six months. In the

North East, six local authorities are working together to develop a peer challenge model which will use self assessments and the new data profiles (see below).

There is a huge amount to gain for local authorities and children and young people if local government can drive improvement itself. The CIB is very grateful for all the work carried out by local authorities and very encouraged by progress so far.

Peer reviews and peer challenge – what's the difference?

These terms are used in different ways:

Sector led *peer challenge for children's services*, now being developed in regions, refers to an annual process of self evaluation and challenge involving two or more councils. It is developing in different ways in different places. It is intended to be a light touch process and there is no prescribed format. The challenge can relate to any aspect of children's services. Sector led peer challenge for children's services mainly relies on time which is donated by officers or councillors in a local authority, in return for challenge from others.

The *children's safeguarding peer review* is the title used for a specialist review of children's safeguarding that is on offer to all local authorities once every three years, funded via the Children's Improvement Board. The exact focus for the review is discussed with the local authority but there is an established model that is followed. Children's safeguarding peer reviews need to be booked with the peer review team via

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Caroline Bosdet caroline.bosdet@local.gov.uk 07876 106183

Beyond children's services, all councils are also entitled to a *free corporate peer challenge* every three years, via the LGA. For more information contact Andy Bates, Principal Adviser Peer Support andy.bates@local.gov.uk 07919 562849.

2. Data profiles for children's services

CIB and its contractor Atkins have been working closely with the ADCS Standards, Performance and Inspection (SPI) Committee to develop the data profiles to support sector led improvement and peer challenge, and have agreed a framework for pilot activity

The framework to be tested includes:

- a data overview, organised into themes and delivery objectives,
- an analysis of the data that stands out as significantly above or below national data (and in future, statistical neighbour data),

- comparison of actual data and that which would be predicted from related variables
- potential questions/lines of enquiry specific to the local authority to support peer challenge

Atkins will be piloting this framework with a small group of local authorities between now and March. **An initial data profile for all 152 local authorities for use in peer challenge activities will be available from February.**

Alongside the testing of the data framework, Atkins will pilot the local information in the draft Munro Performance Framework. They will be asking the pilot authorities about the feasibility of collecting the proposed local performance information and seeking examples from authorities that have already answered the questions posed in the local information section of the Munro framework.

Following the last CIB Bulletin before Christmas, ten local authorities have now been recruited to work in detail with Atkins to pilot and further develop the proposed framework for the data profiles. The authorities involved are:

- Islington,
- Camden,
- Oxfordshire,
- Walsall,
- Bristol,
- Blackburn with Darwen,
- Thurrock
- Gateshead,
- Sheffield,
- Nottinghamshire.

A number of these local authorities will be working with peer challenge partners in piloting the data framework, and others who volunteered to be involved will be part of regional consultation activity.

3. Political leadership for sector led improvement

Sector led improvement for children's services will only succeed if it is based on high quality political leadership. It is vital that lead members for children are involved but council leaders and all councillors also need to support and scrutinise the performance of children's services. Directors of Children's Services are asked to make sure their councillors are briefed on sector led improvement and involved as the work develops in their council and region.

The CIB, with the LGA is taking a number of steps to support councillors and involve them more in sector led improvement by:

- Increasing the number of councillors who are accredited on the basis of their experience to provide mentoring to their colleagues where needed

- Support for regional networks of lead members for children
- An induction event for new children's portfolio holders in July
- Possible funding for free places in the LGA's leadership academy next year.

This bulletin is being circulated to lead members for children in local authorities on the basis of our most up to date contact lists. If you know of any other councillors who would be interested to read this bulletin, please ensure they receive a copy.

4. Looking ahead: the programme and funding for next year

All the partners on CIB and the Department for Education recognise that the change to sector led improvement will take time to develop. The first year for CIB has focused on shaping and setting up the programme. We are expecting funding for next year to build on this year's activities and that we will be able to extend the support offered through regions.

Looking ahead, CIB wants to support local authorities to:

- Move from the previous framework of reporting upwards to central government to a position that emphasises local accountability to citizens and communities, based on robust evidence about outcomes and ambition to achieve the best possible local services.
- Embrace a model of improvement that asks councils to open up their self assessment and improvement work to challenge from their peers, to take more collective responsibility for supporting councils at risk and to get involved with making new policies work on the ground.
- Build a system which can be sustained over time because it is substantially based on donated expertise and reciprocal arrangements across councils

5. Payment by results trials

Work is moving ahead on the payment by results trial areas. All the trial areas have now formulated their project plans and discussions are ongoing around national and local measures. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) were commissioned to undertake a feasibility study on the kinds of national measures that might be used and this has informed the project team's discussions and ultimate submission to the Minister. A copy of the feasibility study is **attached** and will shortly be available on the LGA and NFER websites.

6. Evaluation of sector led improvement early adopters

Early adopters were local authorities or groups of authorities who volunteered to get started in the autumn on peer challenge and sector led support. An evaluation of the work, also by NFER is now complete and has been reported to CIB. The evaluation was commissioned in order to ensure that early experience of sector led improvement work would be captured and fed into

future work. The report clearly demonstrates high levels of support for the work but some significant challenges to capacity. This means that participation has been slow to build and NFER have needed to take this into account when writing the report.

Thank you to all those who shared their experience with NFER. This has made it possible to check out current development plans, make changes in the light of feedback and ensure that future plans eg for improved communications, are informed by the recommendations.

The summary of the report is **attached** and the full versions will be published shortly on the LGA's and NFER's websites.

7. Voluntary and community sector peer challenge

Children England have been commissioned by DfE and CIB to develop a peer challenge for voluntary and community organisations. The peer challenge is at a pilot stage and a number of organisations are needed to get it underway. If you are interested in being part of the peer challenge, either as a host or a challenger, you can find more detail in the **attached** flyer and on how to apply. The project developers are also interested to hear from lead members and officers from the statutory sector who might want to participate in a VCS peer challenge.

Contact with CIB

For further information please see the website:

http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/improvement-and-support/-/journal_content/56/10161/3143339/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

or email: childrens_improvement_board@lga.gov.uk