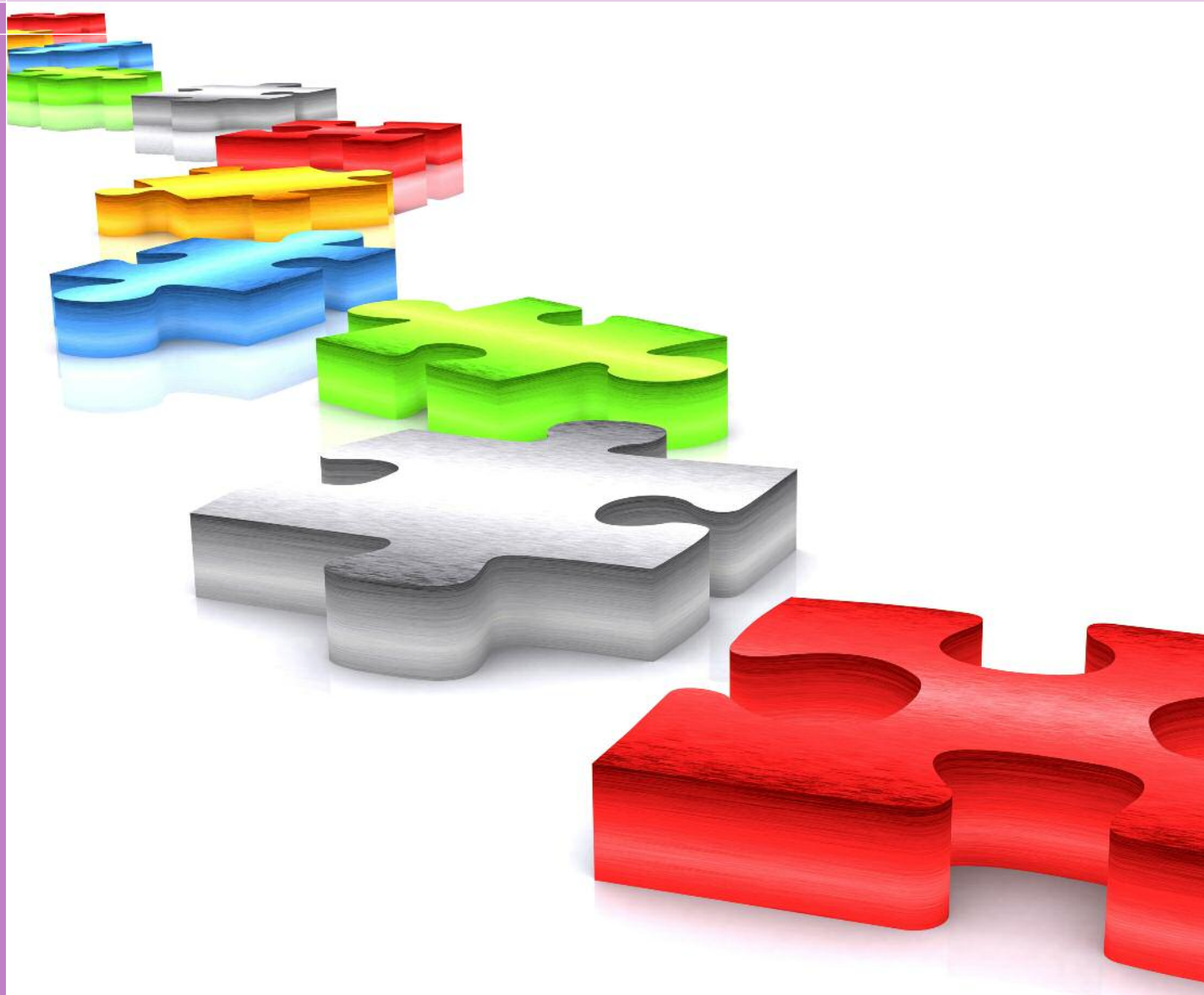


evaluation of the early adopter sector-led improvement programme pilots

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Executive summary

The Children's Improvement Board (CIB) and the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an evaluation of the 'Early Adopter' Programme for sector-led improvement and support. The evaluation took place during the very early stages of the first phase of the programme's development. It had a formative focus, aiming to capture initial learning which could be fed into the future development of the programme, based on the experiences of some of the 'early adopter' local authorities (LAs) involved in piloting the programme. It reflects LAs' views on not just the early adopter programme, but about sector-led improvement and support more widely. The report findings will be of relevance to the CIB, the LGA and the sector in their work in this area.

Key findings

Overall our evaluation shows that engagement in the early adopter programme is promising and developing. Where LAs have embarked on a peer challenge or review, generally they are overwhelmingly positive about its potential **benefits** and commitment to this way of working seems strong. The main benefits of the model relate to:

- the sector having ownership and responsibility for its own development and the opportunity to share best practice with others
- the supportive, but challenging and action-focused ethos of the programme, which was felt by some to differ from that adopted in Ofsted inspection
- having practising peer experts to explore and feedback on current practice, identify areas of improvement and, crucially, suggest how practice can be improved
- the opportunity for reciprocal learning between colleagues offering and receiving peer challenge – some interviewees felt it was the best continuing professional development (CPD) they had ever had
- the programme's ability to address the needs of LAs with different levels of performance – identifying any decline or coasting in high-performing LAs, while supporting low-performing LAs to improve and recognising that they have expertise to offer to others too.

There is, however, still a long way to go to ensure that this programme of work has engagement from the entire sector and, ultimately, brings about improvement in outcomes for localities' children and young people populations.

Areas for development and challenges centre on clarifying expectations at a national, regional and local level. These include:

- the time and availability of colleagues to gift time to offer challenge to another LA, especially given the cuts that LAs are facing. That said, now that LAs generally lack the resource to commission external consultancy support to drive improvement, the sector-led approach was felt to be a good alternative
- securing funding for the programme in the future
- engaging and getting buy-in from those at the top of LAs (corporate services) through to front-line practitioners, especially lead members and service leaders
- engaging the whole sector in the programme, so that it has total credibility and becomes embedded in practice
- clarifying the distinctions between the different sector-led support programmes available to LAs.

Next steps for evaluation

Based on the evidence collected to date, we suggest the following issues require further investigation:

- how LAs decide their area of focus for sector-led improvement, the appropriateness of a narrow or broad focus within different settings and the impact of the different approaches adopted by LAs
- the deployment of the gifted time and which approaches offer the greatest level of challenge and support to bring about improvement
- the extent to which LAs with high Ofsted ratings are learning from others and vice versa (in other words the appropriateness of sector-led improvement for high achieving LAs and those with declining or poor performance)
- the extent to which Ofsted inspectors use sector-led improvement findings when they inspect a LA that has been involved in receiving peer challenge or review
- whether the improvement programme provides regular 'health checks' to support the sectors' development between Ofsted inspections
- the development of a national evaluation framework to be used by LAs to help them to demonstrate the value and impact of sector-led improvement work.

Methods

The main data collection method of this project was interviews with staff in early adopter LAs – those that had been involved in either providing or receiving challenge and support through the sector-led improvement programme. Between November and December 2011, the research team carried out 22 interviews across ten LAs. The LAs were from across England and included county, unitary and London borough LAs. We interviewed the Director of Children's Services (DCS) in all ten LAs. Other interviewees included Lead Members and Heads of Service that had been involved in the work. In addition to the interviews, the research team gathered data from events and from the CIB, which provided contextual information about the sector-led improvement programme.

1 Introduction

The Children's Improvement Board (CIB) and the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an evaluation of the 'Early Adopter' Programme for sector-led improvement and support. The evaluation took place during the very early stages of the first phase of the programme's development. It had a formative focus, aiming to capture initial learning which could be fed into the future development of the programme, based on the experiences of some of the 'early adopter' LAs involved in piloting the programme. It reflects LAs' views on not just the early adopter programme, but about sector-led improvement and support more widely. The report findings will be of relevance to the CIB, the LGA and the sector in their work in this area.

1.1 Sector-led improvement and support

Local authority children's services vary in service delivery performance. For example, some LAs are excellent at supporting their local school systems to improve the quality of children's education, while others have clear strengths in safeguarding or early intervention. Ultimately, these variations in performance impact on outcomes for LAs' children and young people populations, and hence need to be addressed.

The previous Government developed a multi-pronged approach to support and improve performance in LAs. This included inspections and ratings; indicators and target setting; Government Office performance and challenge; field forces monitoring and supporting delivery specific to policy areas; and leadership and development programmes with a more sector-led approach, including the Centre for Excellence in Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) and the Commissioning Support Programme. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this left LAs feeling burdened by a bureaucratic regime involving lots of reporting but seemingly offering differing levels of

support and challenge to improve service delivery and outcomes for children.

Most of these initiatives have been removed by the current Coalition Government, but performance across LA children's services remains variable. The Department for Education (DfE) and the sector have agreed that a system to support LA improvement is, therefore, required. LAs must move away from an 'inadequate' rating; prevent the decline of an 'adequate' service; further improve a 'good' service; and higher performing LAs should have the opportunity to benchmark and draw on excellent practice across the system.

The sector responded positively to this challenge. The LGA agreed to oversee the *whole council* approach to self-regulation and improvement in line with the Government's drive towards localism. Meanwhile, the CIB was created to lead the strategic direction and development of a system for sector-led improvement and support in children's services. The CIB consists of representatives from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), LGA and the DfE. Its work has focused, to date, on the development of a programme of mutual support to LAs in the context of the reduction of central government control and prescription and the end of field forces and other improvement support available to LAs, as outlined above. Developments have been fast moving due to the need to have a basic model of improvement support in place as soon as possible.

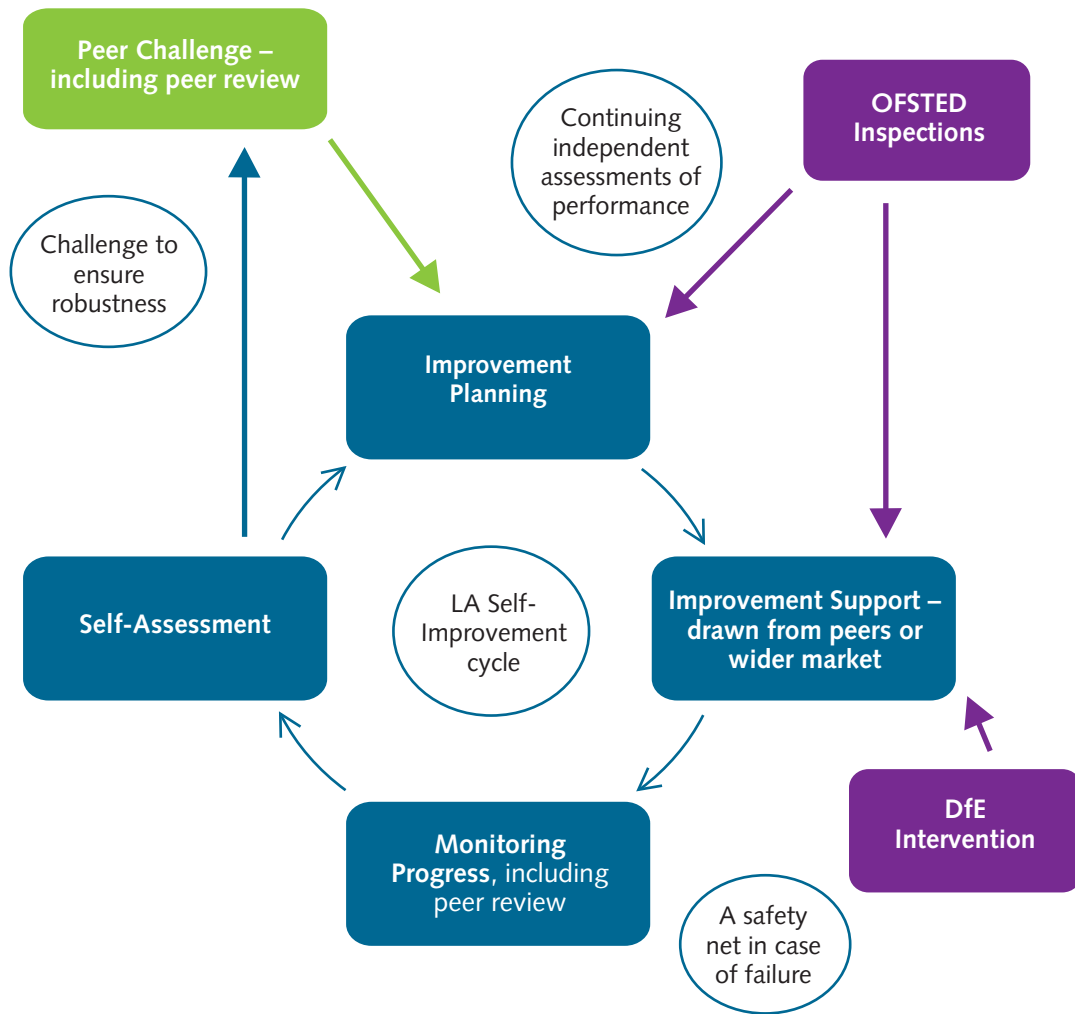
The CIB reported strong support within and across the sector for a sector-led model, with some general agreement around the core features of the model. These include:

- sign up to the use of a self-improvement cycle, with LAs opening up their self-assessment activities within a process of peer challenge and support

- supporting peer challenge activity, with Directors of Children’s Services (DCSs) and senior staff offering five days per annum on a reciprocal basis, building on existing models operated through C4EO (Sector Specialists) and the former Local Government Improvement and Development (LGID) (Peer Reviews – now managed by the LGA)

- Building the development of skills and expertise to deliver peer support and challenge into the national DCS Leadership Programme.

The following diagram depicts the aims and ethos of the programme.



Source: Children’s Improvement Board: Questions and Answers about the Proposed New System of Sector-Led Improvement and Support in Children’s Services: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/18875061>

In early June, the DfE confirmed funding of £10.5m for 2011/12 to support the CIB’s programme of work, with the first steps being to build the system with LAs. LAs were invited to become early adopters or peer challengers within the system and around 80 expressed an interest. The aim was for early adopters to support the CIB in developing a rigorous and systematic peer challenge model which supports LAs in driving their own self-assessment and self-improvement.

Alongside the recruitment of LA early adopters, the CIB has been working to secure a lead member, chief executive and DCS from each region, to act as regional leads. These have recently been appointed and will work towards raising the profile of the programme, gathering intelligence to support their understanding of what is happening at a regional level to share with the region and the CIB. The East Midlands, London boroughs and a group of four councils in Berkshire plus

Brighton and Hove and Hertfordshire (the 'Berkshire 4+2') are already actively working with one another, as are LAs in the West Midlands and those in the East of England.

The CIB has allotted a total of £2.25m for sector-led regional development in this financial year. Although funding will be distributed at a regional level, LAs are encouraged to work together within and across regions. In addition, the CIB has recently appointed 'lead brokers' who will support regional leads to align children's services sector-led improvement alongside other regional and local development and improvement. The aim is to prevent duplication of separate additional and unnecessary systems where existing mechanisms can be aligned.

1.2 Purpose of the evaluation and methods

The purpose of the research was to look at the various delivery models used by some of the early adopter LAs involved in the sector-led peer challenge and support programme, in order to support the programme's further development. Through the evaluation, the research team sought to provide the CIB and LGA with formative information to feed into further developments of sustainable arrangements for sector-led improvement and support by and beyond April 2012.

The main data collection method of this project was interviews with staff in early adopter LAs – those that had been involved in either providing or receiving challenge and support through the sector-led improvement programme. Between November and

December 2011, the research team carried out 22 interviews across ten LAs. The LAs were from across England and included county, unitary and London borough LAs. We interviewed the Director of Children's Services (DCS) in all ten LAs. Other interviewees included Lead Members and Heads of Service that had been involved in the work. We used a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews and analysed the data in themes, as presented in this report.

In addition to the interviews, the research team gathered data from events and from the CIB, which provided contextual information about the sector-led improvement programme.

1.3 Report structure

The structure of the report is outlined below.

Section 2 presents the findings from early adopter LAs on:

- the background and aims of the sector-led improvement programme
- preparing for peer challenge
- the peer challenge experience.

Section 3 presents interviewees' views on the programme.

Section 4 makes suggestions for improving the programme going forward and for its future evaluation.

Section 5 contains the research team's overarching conclusions.

2 Findings from local authorities

Of the LAs involved in the research, only three had received peer support through the early adopter programme. The other LAs were in the very early stages of developing or implementing the programme. Some LAs were only or predominantly able to talk about their involvement in other forms of sector-led improvement support, such as the LGA Safeguarding Peer Reviews. There was also a lack of understanding among many interviewees about the different sector-led improvement support programmes available to LAs. As a result of this, the report refers to sector-led improvement and support more widely than that which is enacted through the early adopter programme. Unless otherwise stated, our findings relate to sector-led improvement programmes in general. Where findings relate specifically to the early adopter programme, we have indicated this. The learning from both 'categories' of findings can usefully be applied to the future development of the early adopter programme.

In the future, the CIB and LGA will need to clarify to the sector the differences between the programmes and the terminology associated with each, as the phrases 'peer challenge' and 'peer review' are used interchangeably. DCSs also have a responsibility to share the differences between the programmes with their staff to prevent confusion about the different model of support being introduced to their LA. The CIB and LGA may like to consider combining the different peer challenge and review models into an overall menu of sector-led improvement and support programmes from which LAs can choose.

2.1 Views on background and aims of the programme

2.1.1 Ambition of the programme

All respondents agreed that the ambition of sector-led improvement programmes was to improve the performance of the sector, which would result in better outcomes for children and young people through new and different approaches. Interviewees elaborated,

stating that other aspects of the programmes' ambition relate to:

- ownership, and the opportunity for the sector to reform itself
- shared responsibility and credibility of the sector to support itself to develop and improve
- access to expertise and sharing of good practice
- developing the skills, knowledge and expertise of colleagues, including aspiring leaders.

Interviewees accepted that sector-led improvement and support has a different ethos and approach (or methodology) to inspection although, ultimately, they share the same aim. This is discussed in greater detail in section 3.3. Sector-led improvement provides a supportive and non-judgemental improvement environment, giving an opportunity for LAs to stand back and reflect on current performance and identify areas for development. Those interviewed felt that this is critical in an environment with less frequent inspections. This was thought to be particularly important for outstanding LAs, who only have three yearly inspections, and may, therefore, need another mechanism to identify and challenge coasting or a decline in performance. The sector-led improvement and support programmes provide LAs with an opportunity to monitor progress within a rigorous national framework. One DCS commented that nothing else exists to support LAs to improve, given the changes that the Coalition Government has made to the regulation of children's services. Interviewees recognised that if sector-led improvement and support programmes do not help to improve practice then there will be more inspection in the future. This is not what the sector or central government wants.

2.1.2 Leading the programmes of work

When asked who is driving forward the development of the sector-led improvement agenda, interviewees' responses focused around three bodies: the government, the CIB and the sector. There was general agreement that initially central government is paving the way for sector-led improvement and support, though interviewees were aware of the CIB's role in driving the early adopter programme forward. They felt, however, that the programme was increasingly being led by ADCS and the sector itself. This view may be a reflection of recent regional developments where DCSs and CIB regional leads are taking more of a lead role in agreeing local arrangements. In addition, it may be that overall there is increasing awareness of and engagement with sector-led improvement models. Interviewees were clear that the sector must lead itself in order to prove that it can achieve the programme's ambitions and show that it can regulate and improve itself.

2.1.3 Why get involved

The research team asked all interviewees what they hoped to gain from involvement in the early adopter programme. Respondents who had been involved in offering challenge and support to another LA and those who had been in receipt of a peer challenge gave similar answers. Analysis revealed that interviewees want to gain an external, critical yet supportive view of progress (or current practice) that would develop the knowledge and skills of practitioners. As one interviewee explained:

What I become concerned about in this job is that I become used to what is happening and I don't see the bigger picture ... so having someone come and have a fresh and wide look, to come to a conclusion and feedback to me is something that is really positive.

For LAs that had identified areas of concern or development, their primary reason for involvement was about having someone outside the LA critically evaluate progress to date. The view was that this would ensure that the LA had progressed as much as they thought they had; to find out whether they were heading in the right 'direction of travel'; and to identify

where practice needed developing to further improve performance and outcomes. One interviewee explained:

The thing I was interested in getting out of it was expert knowledge coming into the LA quite quickly. I didn't have to search for that...enabling me to turn things around quicker than probably would have been the case. The other thing was someone to verify what we had done and whether or not that was being done and impacting.

Although no areas of concern were identified through the peer challenge work in the LAs involved in our research, a number of DCSs expressed a desire that the sector-led improvement and support programmes should support DCSs and LAs with declining performance to identify this early, thereby avoiding any surprises in inspections.

The data shows that interviewees were keen to learn from one another, to share good practice and to develop self-evaluation skills. Interviewees who had been involved in either offering and/or receiving a peer challenge/review said they wanted to learn from seeing practice in a similar yet slightly different context to their own, and to identify what learning they could take and apply within their own setting. Some interviewees expressed pride and a desire to share their own knowledge, skill and expertise to colleagues in another LA to help them improve. When thinking about the reciprocal learning¹, one interviewee involved in offering support through a safeguarding peer review indicated that they had learned more from offering a critical view to another LA than from having it done within their own LA.

Interviewees were also keen to develop evaluative or, as one person described it, 'appreciative enquiry' skills through offering peer challenges and reviews. They felt these skills would support their own day-to-day work. Head of Service interviewees were particularly keen to examine colleagues' practice and apply practical learning within their own setting where they deemed it appropriate.

¹ Reciprocal learning is where the LA receiving support benefits from the input of experienced colleagues in the supporting LA, while the supporting LA is able to learn about different ways of working from visiting another LA.

A small number of interviewees said they hoped that involvement in the programmes would provide a more responsive and timely assessment of their practice than other mechanisms. Several interviewees said the alternative to this model would be commissioning external consultants to explore performance. Lead members and DCSs acknowledged that LAs no longer have the resource to commission consultants to offer such support and valued the additional capacity the early adopter model provides. The programmes of work were perceived to be more responsive and potentially more targeted than external commissioning as the support comes from practising professionals. This was seen as a huge advantage to the programme. The benefits of the programme are discussed further in section 3.6 below.

For children, young people and families

When asked what they hoped involvement in the early adopter programme would offer for children and young people, interviewees agreed that it would lead to improved service provision through sharing good practice and helping individual LAs to identify whether resources are targeted in the right areas. They believed that this would, in the longer term, improve outcomes. There was recognition that it is very early days and that impact to service provision will take time to achieve, while improvements for children, young people and families will take even longer to be realised. Some LAs also recognised the challenges associated with measuring change, which are discussed in section 2.3.4 below.

2.2 Preparing for peer challenge

2.2.1 Deciding the focus

All but one LA used local assessment data (self-assessment and/or Ofsted judgements) and/or historical knowledge of a longstanding area of difficulty (for example, high numbers of looked-after children) to decide the focus for their challenge or review. The documents and information used to support this process included Ofsted inspection reports, self-assessment data and Children and Young People Plans (CYPPs). One LA representative mentioned using regional comparative data. None of those asked had used the LGA Knowledge Hub² and only one person had used the C4EO data profiles³ to assist with this

task. One interviewee who was involved in developing a regional approach to sector-led improvement said that in the future there would be an expectation for data profiles to be used to support DCSs in deciding the area for challenge. Although the sector-led improvement and support programme has a very different ethos to an inspection, a small number of interviewees noted that the preparatory work required is not dissimilar to that needed for an inspection.

Refining the area of focus was done with varying degrees of success in the early adopter LAs, with some LAs having too broad a focus. Representatives from some LAs stated that the focus for areas of challenge needs to be clearly defined, as does the information and documentation provided to the LA offering the support. There was agreement that although documents are needed in advance of peer challenges or reviews, a balance needs to be reached about what information (and level of information) should be provided. We therefore suggest that LAs are provided with more guidance at a national and regional level on what information should be provided to the team offering the peer challenge.

Interestingly, one LA chose to focus their peer challenge on an area that they knew did not have a particular problem and in part used the early adopter programme as a pilot for the methodology. The LA still wanted intelligence on what was working and, indeed, the peer challenge identified areas for development that the Chief Executive said would be taken forward. In the future, the LA would use peer challenge to explore other areas that they were less confident about.

Where LAs had received challenge and support through the early adopter programme, the LA and either their broker or paired DCS spent time honing the focus for the challenge. One interviewee described these as 'scoping meetings'. The format of the scoping meetings

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- 2 The LGA Knowledge Hub is an online platform which uses the latest technology and social networking to develop networks in the local government sector.
 - 3 The C4EO data profiles provide DCSs with LA level data on key performance indicators. They are interactive, provide trend data and link to supplementary datasets held by a range of Government departments.

varied and was decided between the LA receiving the sector-led improvement and the team offering the support. Within one receiving LA, the lead reviewer met with the challenging LA team to clarify the focus and expectations. In another, the team of reviewers met with the receiving LA team and held similar discussions. Within one region, LAs have adopted a commissioning approach to the sector-led improvement and support model, whereby the DCS requesting the challenge commissions the team to explore the topic area. Irrespective of the approach taken, all interviewees agreed that spending time early on to clarify the focus for challenge or review helps to refine the support.

Narrow or broad focus

The research team asked interviewees for their perceptions on whether the focus for the peer challenge should be narrowly defined or broad in its focus. Generally interviewees agreed that the focus for the challenge or review should not be too broad as, within five days, only so much can be explored and achieved⁴. Furthermore, the focus needs to be narrow enough to enable a 'deep dive' to support LAs to improve and change. As one DCS explained: 'A narrow focus is critical, otherwise it will dissipate and we won't get value from it.' That said, some research participants explained that the decision about a broad or narrow focus should be decided by the DCS requesting the sector-led improvement and support. They felt that the model should enable enough flexibility in its approach to allow this level of ownership. Another interviewee felt that the focus needed to be defined but that there should also be the flexibility to 'follow your nose' during the challenge, should a new line of enquiry emerge, especially where the focus is on safeguarding.

2.2.2 Local buy-in

All participants agreed that sector-led improvement and support programmes need the support and buy in of colleagues to achieve their aims. Overall, interviewees agreed that lead member, chief executive and service manager support is critical to success. Views on the level of engagement needed from corporate colleagues (chief executives and lead members) varied, however. A small number of interviewees argued that lead member engagement

would be needed where policy might be changed or funding streams altered. Where the focus of the sector-led improvement work is at an operational level, respondents felt that member engagement is less vital. One interviewee suggested that lead member engagement is only required at the end of the process once the findings have been shared and the implications of these are clear. The consensus seemed to show that lead members should engage with the model, and be made aware of their LA's involvement, although their involvement may be at a distance. We would recommend that lead members should be at least informed of and involved in scoping the topic for peer challenge or review. One LA, for example, regularly updated their lead member through their portfolio meetings. Similarly, ADCS and LGA support will be necessary in the future to help the early adopter programme achieve its overall aims at a national level.

Respondents also agreed that engagement and support from service managers and team managers is essential for driving improvement. They argued that buy in 'all the way down the organisation' is needed as service leaders are the ones who have to engage with the improvement agenda at the front line. A small number of DCSs commented that this could be challenging in an LA that has recently received a negative Ofsted judgement. DCSs were mindful of the sensitivities of inviting additional people into their LA to critique and challenge their practice. We recommend that those responsible for driving forward this work in LAs explain to service leaders, managers and front line workers that this model offers a supportive framework for improvement. There was a consensus across most LAs that the DCS is responsible for buy in up and down the LA, suggesting that DCSs should take a leading role in communicating the value of the review process to colleagues.

When thinking about the future, one DCS expressed a desire to extend buy in to include LA partner agencies. As one lead member explained 'you cannot compartmentalise children's services'. Nonetheless, the current focus at LA level was felt to be appropriate at the moment, given that the programme is so young.

4 As part of the improvement agenda, the DfE is supporting every DCS to 'gift' five days of their time each year to support development in another LA.

Given the early stages of the early adopter programme implementation, the level of service user knowledge, engagement and buy in to this type of work had not been considered in most LAs involved in the research. Within one LA, however, the DCS felt that getting service user engagement in this type of work might confuse the public. There was a perception that the public are most interested in Ofsted judgements and that publicising sector-led improvement and support work might 'muddy the water'. Explaining the difference between various inspections and between the different sector-led improvement and support programmes might be difficult. That said, in this LA the peer review findings were considered public documents and the LA wanted to share its commitment to improvement with the local community.

2.2.3 Establishing ground rules

There was agreement across all interviewees that establishing ground rules for all the sector-led improvement programmes is essential. Interviewees agreed that these must include a clear statement of what the peer challenge or review is about and why. Generally the ground rules were thought to be 'common sense' and would include the usual procedures and protocols in place within LAs relating to confidentiality, data sharing and escalation where areas of concern are identified. In addition, suggestions for ground rules included expressing a desire for transparency, trust, openness and honesty; developing a dispute resolution agreement and guaranteeing anonymity to staff. These issues link back to the overall aim of the programmes and the commonality and differences between sector-led improvement and the inspection regime, with LAs being prepared to openly share their practice with colleagues to bring about improvement.

2.2.4 Regional support

Interviewees were asked about the support offered by regional brokers. As a result of the timing of the evaluation, most LAs had only recently met their regional lead or broker and were unable to comment on the value of the support offered. We therefore asked interviewees about their region's plans to develop the early adopter programme in the future. There was agreement that having a regional approach and

regional support should provide the early adopter programme with momentum. It is early days for the regional development work but plans are in place to drive the programme forward regionally in early 2012. Interviewees felt that enabling the sector to challenge itself using locally deployed people is, in some cases, better than having external input. There is a balance to be struck between LAs being familiar with each other's practice and getting a completely fresh look at practice. On the whole, DCSs were confident that the model provides enough flexibility to engage local experts where appropriate, but to also look outside the region when this is required. Interviewees felt that having a regional approach would support the programme's development, as colleagues often work together within regions.

There was some feedback, however, that regional and national brokers' areas of responsibility need to be clearer. One LA representative said they were put in touch with their partner LA through the broker, but had no further contact or input from their link person. We recommend that the effectiveness of regional brokers and leads should be explored in greater detail in the future, when they have been in post for a longer period of time. This will help the CIB and LGA to ensure the regional brokers and leads are being effective in their role and have credibility amongst the sector in offering support and driving through change.

2.3 Peer challenge experience

One of the initial purposes of the evaluation was to explore the different approaches that LAs had adopted in the early adopter programme. As discussed above, most LAs had not progressed far with implementing the programme of work at the time of evaluation. They had, however, facilitated discussions; started to plan their topic areas of challenge or review; and were putting plans in place at a local and/or regional level to drive forward the programme in the future.

As we noted earlier, there was a lack of understanding around the differences between the various sector-led improvement and support programmes. Lead members and DCSs seemed clear that different models of sector-led support are available, but talked about the various programmes of work collectively. It is within this context that we present the following sections, which explore the format of sector-led improvement and support.

2.3.1 Challenge and review process

There was consensus among interviewees that the format of the sector-led improvement and support programme should be flexible. Depending on the topic of focus and the urgency with which support or challenge is required, interviewees agreed that whether the five days of gifted time is deployed consecutively or over a period of months should be at the discretion of the DCS requesting the challenge. One interviewee explained that where the challenge or review is 'mission critical', the LA might request support from Monday to Friday within one week, whereas if they want to track change over time, it might be more appropriate for the work to be carried out over several months. DCSs should discuss expectations around the ways in which days are deployed early on in the process.

Format and structure of peer challenge

In all LAs, preparatory work had been supported through early conversations and/or face-to-face meetings to decide and clarify the focus. The time spent in the LA looking at practice and offering that challenge took place over two to three days and peer challengers verbally fed back findings on the last day. One LA, however, chose to receive support over a few weeks, a pragmatic decision based on people's availability and the ability to 'clear diaries'. One team, whose scope for the challenge was quite wide, noted that they had to work very long days to collate findings ready for feeding back key messages at the end of the process. Future evaluation will need to explore the deployment of the gifted time and which approach, if either, offers the greatest level of challenge and support to drive improvement.

In terms of coordinating the visits, one LA appointed a third tier manager to coordinate the early adopter process. They arranged accommodation for the review team; access to conference facilities in the hotel to facilitate late working; and passes to access LA buildings. They were also given the authority to set up meetings and make the arrangements. Other LAs might like to consider this approach when managing sector-led improvement and support programmes in the future, though they should be aware of the resource implications. One region has appointed an external body to help the DCSs manage the practicalities and

logistics of the sector-led improvement and support programme in the future.

The structure of the early adopter peer challenges followed similar lines in all the LAs. The teams offering the challenge carried out interviews with colleagues in the LA receiving the challenge; these were either one to one, paired or group interviews. In some LAs, the team also observed team meetings. In one LA, after the peer challenge work, the team offering the challenge sent questionnaires to partner agencies to explore their perceptions of joint working. The LA's representatives said that the findings from this activity would be collated into the final feedback report. Where questionnaires or common templates are used by teams conducting challenge and review, regional leads and the CIB might like to consider collating these to prevent LAs reinventing the wheel. A repository of tools and forms could be collated and shared with DCSs alongside the data profiles. We would recommend that their use is optional, rather than prescribed.

Logistical challenges

Interviewees were asked about any logistical issues that arose either during a peer challenge or review, or might happen in the future. Minor areas of suggestion arose. These included ensuring that scheduling of meetings (or interviews) allows a break between sessions; that colleagues in the receiving LA should travel to meet the team providing the challenge; and that a manageable amount of information and documentation is provided to the team offering the challenge prior to the visits.

DCSs agreed that protocols and procedures around confidentiality, data sharing and escalating areas of concern are generally in place within LAs. They explained that LAs are used to having external visitors and inspectors examine practice and the same processes around confidentiality and data sharing, for example, apply to sector-led programmes. Nothing additional needs to be put in place to support this way of working. That said, within one region, procedures around dispute resolution were being implemented at the start, in case any issues arose during a review or challenge. Where regions or individual LAs are developing similar processes and procedures, the CIB should collate and share these nationally, to minimise duplication of effort.

2.3.2 Five days of 'gifted time'

All DCSs were asked about the appropriateness of the five days of gifted time and whether it was enough or too many days. Generally interviewees agreed that five days 'seemed about right'. There was agreement that any less than that would not enable a team to gain a detailed enough insight into an area to be able to provide a meaningful judgement or recommendations for improvement. More than five days felt increasingly burdensome and interviewees acknowledged that it would be difficult to set aside the time. Having said that, and as one DCS described, 'five days is a bit of a misnomer'. Even though five days of DCS time might be spent offering the support and challenge, there is preparation work to do in advance to agree and hone the focus and there may be follow up work afterwards. In addition, DCSs are supported by a team of people, therefore LAs are gifting more than just five days of DCSs' time.

Our research shows that there is still uncertainty about how the days should and will be accounted for.

However, there was agreement from those interviewed that the fieldwork should take around two and half to three days only. A small number of those interviewed noted that when looking at a safeguarding issue, five days may not be long enough to dig deep enough into practice, as it will take peer challengers time to understand and assess current practice, before being able to make suggestions for development. Despite these challenges, interviewees noted that LAs no longer have the capacity to buy external consultant support, and that this model offers added value in that it is an exchange of time and learning, with reciprocal learning and benefit.

In principle, interviewees at all levels agreed that the five days is a good concept. However, they identified some areas for improvement:

- striking a balance between the time allocated to peer challenge and the depth in which issues can be explored
- clarifying how the five days can be deployed and what these could or should include, these are important discussions that DCSs and/or their teams should have at the outset

- ensuring enough flexibility in the system to allow LAs to spend longer exploring issues where necessary and if collectively agreed by both DCSs and their teams
- clarifying to all stakeholders that sector-led improvement and support is about 'invest to save'.

Future monitoring and evaluation work should seek to clarify the approaches LAs have undertaken and which approaches are deemed most successful. DCSs also need to ensure they discuss these issues with their team and those offering challenge or support at the outset to clarify expectations.

2.3.3 Feeding back findings and next steps

Feeding back overall messages

The area in which there was least consensus related to feeding back the findings from the early adopter peer challenge or review work. All agreed that the key messages or findings need to be clearly accessible and communicated in a timely fashion at the end of the process. Some interviewees felt that findings should be written into a report, whereas others felt that a PowerPoint presentation is most appropriate. Written reports, where desired, should be sent within one week. As outlined at the start of this report, LAs want to know if their practice is 'on the right track' and where they need to improve service provision to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

When thinking about the appropriateness of a written report, some interviewees commented that it was essential as it provides an evidence base and fixed point of reference. This would ensure that key messages are not changed or diluted as colleagues discuss findings. Other interviewees disagreed, feeling that too much time could be spent discussing nuances of words and that the key messages could be lost. One interviewee noted that if reports are written, these need to be short and focused (i.e. a maximum of four pages and similar in structure and length to Ofsted letters), they should also be a collective analysis of the findings, and should share conclusions and recommendations for practice. One DCS explained the perceived benefit of the Ofsted reports in terms of the consistency in language and common descriptors; this

is something that could be replicated in the early adopter programme feedback. The CIB might like to consider working with regional leads to collate and share best practice examples of short, evidence-based, well structured reports.

There was agreement that findings need to be fed back to lead members either by the team offering the challenge or review or through regular meetings between DCSs and portfolio holders. Lead members would be able to offer a different perspective and act as a sounding board to the DCS, as well as a 'reality check' to both LAs.

Regular feedback during the process

All interviewees who had been involved in either the early adopter programme or a peer review felt that regular updates throughout the challenge or review period are crucial. Not only does it enable LAs to discuss practical issues about the arrangements, but it also supports the process. It helps the team offering the review to keep the receiving LA updated on emerging findings, thus managing expectations and preventing any 'surprises' at the end. Across all the LAs involved, no unexpected findings arose during their peer challenges or reviews. Regular feedback also facilitated discussion between the two teams and supported a flexible way to explore new lines of enquiry or test out key issues. The iterative process was valued by all involved and the opportunity for discussion was considered vital.

Incorporating findings

One LA wrote an action plan following their involvement in the early adopter programme, but generally the findings from the challenge or review were incorporated into existing plans. There was agreement that this should be at the discretion of the two LAs and should be agreed at the outset. As the early adopter programme is implemented in more LAs, further investigation about how the messages emerging through peer challenges and reviews are being taken forward within LAs should be explored. This will help to measure the impact of the early adopter programme and sector-led improvement more widely.

2.3.4 Impact

Although it was not one of the aims of the evaluation to look at impact, the research team asked about any early signs of impact from LA involvement in sector-led programmes of work. We also asked about anticipated impact in the future. As expected, it is too early to explore the impact of the early adopter programme, not least because most regions and LAs plan to take forward development in early 2012. That said, two examples of what the early adopter programme offers LAs emerged:

- In one LA, the peer challenge work was carried out alongside a re-commissioning process. The sector-led improvement and support work further informed the work and although it did not make a 'big difference', it was useful in that it added another layer of information.
- In other LAs the process validated that the LA was moving in the right 'direction of travel', it supported their self-assessment activities and provided a vehicle and evidence base to implement change.

Based on experience to date, interviewees argued that the programmes of work support workforce development through reciprocal learning. Some interviewees said the programme had offered them the best CPD they had experienced. There was a belief that it offers practitioner engagement in improvement, giving depth and quality to their work, and that it should equip new and aspiring leaders with the necessary skills to be critical and look acutely at service improvement in the future. It also promotes self-awareness and encourages the profession to be adaptive.

Interviewees expected the early adopter programme to have a positive impact in the future. There was a strong sense of the need to monitor and evaluate progress and impact of the programme in the future, however. Indeed, one region is developing a formal evaluation framework around sector-led improvement and support from the outset.

3 Views on sector-led improvement and support work

3.1 Peer challenge core skills

The research team asked interviewees to identify the core skills and qualities that successful peer challengers should possess. There was broad agreement across the group. The key attributes that peer challengers should have, according to interviewees, are:

- Outstanding interpersonal skills, and 'emotional intelligence':
 - being approachable
 - being able to gain trust quickly and be able to build rapport
 - having empathy and awareness of sensitive issues (especially where, for example, the receiving LA had just had an inspection)
 - understanding of the context of the receiving LA
 - having good listening and communication skills.
- Good 'subject' knowledge and knowledge of what good practice looks like. Specifically peer challengers should have:
 - front-line knowledge and practical experience
 - personal credibility and a proven track record (i.e. they need to have experience of delivering whatever it is they are advising the other LA about)
 - an appreciation of the perspective of service users.
- Respect for how other LAs work, and recognise that LAs have the right to accept or decline recommendations for changing ways of working.
- Analytical skills:
 - being able to assimilate lots of information quickly

- being able to review the evidence and distil it down to the key messages
- being able to triangulate evidence and look at messages from different sources
- possessing curiosity and questioning skills.

- Objectivity.
- To be able to ask difficult or tricky questions when needed and have the confidence to confront issues that need tackling in a constructive manner.
- Rigour.

Interviewees also explained that the skills and experience of the people providing the challenge are important for the integrity of the work: 'it is as good as the people you put forward to give the support'. In light of the emphasis on the quality of the people involved, and the wide variety of skills required to conduct a useful peer challenge, the CIB, regional leads and LAs need to choose the people to be involved carefully. Interviewees recognised that senior staff in LAs are likely to have many of the skills needed to deliver the early adopter programme, particularly those with a background of providing challenge and mentoring support. Consideration, however, should be given to training and support for less experienced staff to ensure they have the appropriate background knowledge (for example, in a particular service) to enable them to provide productive and constructive peer challenge.

3.2 Added value

We asked interviewees what they think the added value that sector-led improvement brings to LAs is, compared to other initiatives and support and improvement mechanisms. Interviewees felt that the sector-led improvement model provides benefits not found in other initiatives. In particular, peer to peer support was seen as providing a 'critical friend' within

a culture of trust and collaborative working. This is perhaps in contrast to Ofsted inspections, which were not felt to offer a supportive framework in which to develop.

Interviewees felt that a central feature of the early adopter programme and other peer support is learning from each other's experiences. Both LAs gain from working together. For those receiving the challenge and support from another LA, one of the main benefits is that they could learn from the real experience of others, which made the support highly relevant and applicable to their efforts to improve. Several interviewees highlighted that the key strength of the early adopter programme is the inclusion of peer to peer support, because the people providing the support, challenge and feedback face the same issues and pressures as the people in the receiving LA. As one interviewee explained: 'practitioner engagement is what gives it real depth and quality'.

Interviewees felt that LAs are likely to be more open and honest when working with another LA than they would be with external agencies, such as Ofsted. The input was characterised as being current, practical and 'on the ground' support to help to reduce burden and drive improvement. This was felt to be in contrast to the support received from external bodies, where those offering the support often may not have recent practical experience or background. One interviewee stated:

...to have the opportunity from someone who does your job, to look at what you do and struggles with the same issues but in a different context – this is the real value of it. Someone out of the job for five, ten, fifteen years is not as familiar with current pressures as someone who was doing it on Tuesday.

The peer to peer support was also seen to provide a way for the sector to demonstrate that it is able to lead its own development and improvement from within. Although, as discussed in the following section, it was not seen as a replacement or duplication of inspections, interviewees thought there is a role for peer to peer support in identifying areas for improvement. As one interviewee explained: 'it is about the sector taking moral responsibility for its own performance'. However, one interviewee cautioned that while learning from within the sector is useful, LAs also

need to be open to, and aware of, lessons that could be learned from other sectors and organisations.

All interviewees were asked whether the sector-led improvement and support programme is suitable for LAs with 'outstanding' inspection judgements and those that are lower rated. A few interviewees highlighted that even LAs that had an 'outstanding' rating would still have areas of weakness that need improvement and 'inadequate' LAs would have areas of good practice that others could learn from. As a result, the early adopter programme was seen to be something that could be used by all LAs to drive up standards for all. As one DCS explained:

I think everybody can learn from everybody else and I don't sense when I see directors together any hierarchy [in terms of ratings].

Further monitoring and evaluation of the programme should be considered in the future to ascertain the extent to which LAs with high Ofsted ratings are learning from others and vice versa.

3.3 Sector-led improvement and Ofsted

Interviewees were asked how, if at all, the early adopter programme sits alongside Ofsted. Overall, there was agreement that the two models have different but complementary roles. Indeed, two LAs had shared or planned to share the feedback from their peer review or challenge with Ofsted in the future. The two were seen to have different functions, and this was considered important by LAs, as illustrated by one DCS:

They've got to do different things; if the sector-led improvement work duplicates the inspection framework then it is a waste of time.

Another explained:

[it] won't replace Ofsted. The inspection regime will still be there, but this is about the sector taking a higher level of responsibility and earlier identification of things that are not working in a LA.

On the whole, LA representatives viewed the sector-led improvement work as a way of having an external health check outside of the inspection process. It is a

check that highlights strengths as well as deficiencies. In addition, LAs felt that it was important that the early adopter programme follows up challenge and reports issues with practical advice on how areas of difficulty might be overcome. The conversation between peers was seen as essential and useful. This was felt to be in contrast to the inspection regime, which some interviewees said presented challenges, but rarely offered solutions. One interviewee said:

It is a learning process in practice, it gives independent but non-judgemental assessment of own practice. It gives a steer as to how to improve practice.

Furthermore, although most interviewees felt that there were similarities in terms of sector-led improvement and inspections, the added value of the early adopter programme is the provision of support to improve and the monitoring and feedback role. As one interviewee explained:

...remember Ofsted don't offer advice, Ofsted provide a measurement of where you are. The role of sector-led improvement has to do more than tell you where you are at a point in time, it has to say something about the journey.

In addition, the sector-led improvement and support programme was seen to enable continuous improvement, whereas the frequency of inspections is declining. As there is a drive to reduce the frequency of inspections, particularly those rated outstanding, the sector-led improvement programme could be well placed to provide regular 'health checks', support monitoring of performance and facilitate improvement within the sector. If the work takes on this role, as interviewees indicated it should, the effectiveness of the sector-led support would need to be monitored over time to check that this function is being fulfilled.

Although it was clear that interviewees felt that the peer to peer work should not duplicate the work of inspections, several said that the early adopter programme should identify areas that need improvement and that would be captured by a subsequent inspection. Those interviewed stated that not only would the programme be unsuccessful, overall, if a LA failed an inspection after a peer review or challenge, but that it would damage the reputation of individuals involved in providing the challenge. A small number of interviewees felt that at a policy level,

work needs to be done to establish how sector-led improvement programmes and Ofsted feed into each other, if at all. Indeed, this will need to be monitored over time, and in the future it would be worth exploring the extent to which Ofsted inspectors use early adopter programme findings in their inspections.

3.4 Credibility and ensuring improvement

Given the potential criticisms of the early adopter programme, with some espousing that this model of working may not have credibility, we explored this issue with interviewees. Generally interviewees thought the early adopter programme already had credibility with those involved in the work. However, there was a feeling that its credibility and profile needs to be raised with those outside of the sector.

Generally interviewees thought that the process had credibility because it uses experienced practitioners to provide support, rather than external consultants who may have been out of an LA for some time. In addition, the programme is solution focused and offers recommendations for practice. Interviewees felt that the input from peers from another LA challenges existing processes and enables reciprocal learning and a wider sharing of knowledge. There were some areas where establishing the reputation of the model would be ongoing; for example, as discussed in section 3.3. Several interviewees felt that in order for the process to have credibility, peer challengers must identify and discuss anything that might get raised in an inspection.

The integrity of the programme was also said to link to the quality of the people providing the support and challenge to other LAs. As one interviewee explained, for sector-led improvement to take place, peer challengers need to be confident that difficult messages are being transmitted, and that peer challengers or reviewers are not just relaying the messages that they think others want to hear. There is an important role for regional leads and DCSs to play in ensuring that the teams involved in offering peer challenge and review possess the relevant skills and attributes (as set out in section 3.1).

Demonstrating the robustness of the early adopter programme was felt to be very important, not only for ensuring credibility of the work, but also for its future

development. Some interviewees suggested ways to avoid the process appearing to be too 'cosy'. These included, for example, ensuring that LAs providing support are able to look at a randomly selected set of cases rather than a set pre-defined by the receiving LA. Another suggestion related to pairing LAs with lead members from different political parties. Furthermore, there was a view that there needs to be a quality assurance process in place, as well as clarity and transparency of the role of those involved in the programme. While all national appointments have been through a transparent procurement process, the perception of one interviewee was that there needs to be better transparency in how people are appointed to carry out various tasks within the early adopter programme (such as the brokers and regional leads). Another thought that having a national evaluation framework to be used by all LAs involved in the work would go some way to help demonstrate the consistently positive work of the sector-led improvement model.

Buy-in from senior staff within the LA was seen as important to sustain and embed the work (as discussed in detail in section 2.2). Furthermore, interviewees felt that there was a role for champions of the work, in particular the CIB, to promote this way of working to other LAs and beyond, to ensure that it is sustained. Interviewees felt that the outputs from the work need to be of high quality in order to make a case for continued funding and encourage LAs to remain engaged in the work. In addition, interviewees said that the impact of the work in terms of changes to service delivery should be evidenced. Although some were unsure of how this might look in reality, others suggested regional or national approaches to evidencing impact.

Some interviewees felt that the early adopter programme needs to demonstrate effectiveness and have credibility relatively quickly in order to retain momentum and gain further funding to enable the model to become embedded. There was some concern that the programme needs time to demonstrate its worth, with one interviewee worried that the programme might not show improvement quickly enough to convince central government that the funding is a worthwhile investment that should be sustained.

Overall, respondents bought into the philosophy of sector-led improvement and support, although some of those interviewed expressed a desire for the programme to be better defined and focused. They also felt that the infrastructure of the model needed further development (suggestions for development are explored in detail in section 4). Interviewees felt that the early adopter programme offers a worthwhile endeavour, and is sufficiently flexible and responsive to be of use to LAs across the country. There is, however, a need to show evidence of positive impact publically to help introduce it to more LAs and to embed it in the ways LAs work. It also requires the support of the entire sector to engage. Interviewees argued that there is a collective responsibility for DCSs and councils to engage in the early adopter programme to help embed and ensure credibility around this model of working. To help achieve this, activities taking place through the peer to peer challenge and support should be monitored and will provide an important check on progress. This will capture instances of good practice and where things work less well. There may be a role for the CIB and regional leads to collate and share good practice across LAs, through newsletters, events or other networks.

3.5 Advice to others

Interviewees who had either experienced an early adopter peer challenge or a peer review, were also asked what, if anything, they would do differently next time. On the whole, suggestions related to minor practical issues and did not question the ethos or methodology of sector-led improvement and support. Practical suggestions included:

- spend time at the outset establishing the area of focus, honing the commission to ensure the topic is not broad and unwieldy
- clarify and manage the expectations of the team receiving the challenge
- clarify the audience receiving the messages following the peer challenge or review for both teams
- clarify the timescale for the challenge or review, including feeding back findings

- consider involving both DCSs in deciding how the improvement agenda should be implemented within the LA receiving the challenge or review
- ensure the process for feeding back findings is agreed at the outset and allow time for discussion between the two teams during – and at the end of – the process
- when feeding back findings to the LA, ensure that the group is not too big and consider holding one session for senior leaders and another for staff involved, to facilitate appropriate discussion with each stakeholder group
- consider actively engaging lead members in peer challenge and review when offering challenge to another LA; this may not always be an appropriate use of time, but where members can offer a different perspective, they should be more actively involved
- ensure the DCS is available and in the LA during the challenge period
- ensure colleagues offering challenge or review have the necessary skills and expertise
- agree how feedback will be reported at the outset; where written reports are required make sure that these are short and pithy (a maximum of four pages); present the collective view of the team; clearly identify areas of strength, areas for improvement; and make recommendations for how the LA can improve performance.

Suggestions for further development of the programme related to:

- clarifying the support and structure around regional brokers
- clearly outlining the aim and structure of the sector-led improvement and support programme at a national level
- ensuring that the whole sector is involved in the programme's development, and not just specific regions.

3.6 Successes and challenges

All interviewees were asked about the benefits and challenges associated with being involved in the early adopter programme. Interviewees highlighted a number of ways in which the early adopter has or will benefit LAs, which is encouraging for the future development of the programme. These are presented below.

3.6.1 Benefits of sector-led improvement

Interviewees identified a number of benefits of being involved in the early adopter programme, which are listed below.

- Overall, LA respondents felt that the main success of the programme is that the sector is taking responsibility for its own improvement, and showing that it can be done.
- The peer to peer support (as discussed in section 3.2) was seen as a particular strength of the approach because it is enabling LAs to improve themselves through support and learning from other LAs' experiences.
- Not only was the early adopter programme seen to develop LAs as a whole, but the work also provides professional development for individual staff in both the 'receiving' and 'challenging'/'supporting' LAs.
- The early adopter programme made some LAs look at how they work in a new and different light, supporting them to reflect on current practice and ways to do things differently. As one interviewee explained:

Personally for me, it has made a difference in the way I look at things. I most probably got more out of those three days than any other training I have been on.
- LAs highlighted the sharing of skills, experience and expertise across and within LAs as another strength of the work.
- Interviewees also felt that the sector-led improvement work is encouraging benchmarking against other LAs which might also help improve practice in the future.

As they emerge, success stories and examples of impact should be disseminated. This may also help to address some of the challenges outlined below.

3.6.2 Challenges of sector-led improvement

Interviewees suggested a few areas of difficulty related to being involved in sector-led improvement and support, along with potential solutions. These are presented below.

- The biggest challenge identified was that of time and, linked to this, availability of staff to participate. In particular, interviewees perceived trying to fit its peer challenge and review around other work and existing commitments to be difficult. Several interviewees suggested that making it 'part of the day job' would not only help to embed the work in LAs, but would also reduce the issue of time and availability. Increased use of technology for communication (such as video and teleconferencing) between LAs was another suggestion for reducing the issue of time, particularly for pairs of LAs from different parts of the country. The use of remote communication methods would need to be balanced with the reported benefits of face-to-face support, however.
- Buy in from staff, particularly senior staff, was seen as important for sector-led improvement. However, some LAs felt that obtaining buy in was a challenge because some people were initially unclear about what would be in it for them. There is a role for the CIB, regional leads and the ADCS in sharing the

purpose and aims of the early adopter programme and examples of good practice where the programme has brought about improvement.

- One interviewee highlighted the challenge associated with engaging all LAs in the work, not just those that are keen on this way of working. Demonstrating the credibility and successes of the work may help to obtain buy in from those unsure of the benefits.
- Gaining funding was felt to be a future challenge (rather than a current problem). Interviewees felt that senior staff championing the work within and across LAs would help to build the profile and sustain the work, thus supporting the case for continued funding.
- Interviewees identified challenges around ensuring the transparency of processes and that early adopter programme procedures or guidelines are in place, where needed. In particular, several interviewees felt work needs to be done to establish how the impact of sector-led improvement will be evidenced. As discussed above, some suggested a framework that all LAs could use, although this would need to be generic enough to be suitable for use by LAs with different areas of focus. One DCS, for example, described LAs 'getting caught up in a wave of enthusiasm' but without any mechanisms for evidencing what has been done or being able to show the benefits.

Although interviewees raised several areas of difficulty, these are not insurmountable. The CIB, LGA and ADCS should consider how they find solutions to these issues.

4 Suggestions for improvement

Based on the evidence presented in this report, our key recommendations for different audiences for the future development of the full sector-led improvement programme are outlined below. Some of our recommendations are relevant to more than one audience, while others are specific.

4.1 Recommendations for policy makers

Policy makers should communicate their position and expectations around take-up of the full sector-led improvement programme in the future. This will support the sector to engage with the programme of work.

Further thought needs to be given to the position of the early adopter programme and peer reviews alongside Ofsted inspections. Currently, there is a lack of clarity about how one formally supports the other.

Further investigation into the impact of the early adopter programme and other peer to peer work needs to be carried out to assess its worth and value in improving outcomes for children and young people in the longer term. This will support ministers to make future funding decisions.

4.2 Recommendations for the CIB and LGA

Clarifying sector-led improvement programmes of support

The CIB and LGA need to clarify, for the sector, the differences between the different sector-led improvement programmes and the terminology associated with each; the phrases 'peer challenge' and 'peer review' are currently used interchangeably.

Although the early adopter programme appears to have credibility with those involved in the work, more needs to be done to promote its credibility and raise its profile among those outside of the sector.

Programme delivery

At a national and regional level, more should be done to support LAs to ascertain what information is needed to support LAs offering challenge.

Consideration should be given to the training and support offered to less experienced staff when they are involved in sector-led improvement work. The CIB, regional leads and LAs need to ensure peer challengers/reviewers have the appropriate skills, confidence and expertise to carry out the role effectively.

The future development of the early adopter programme

The CIB and LGA may like to consider combining the different peer challenge and review models into an overall menu of sector-led improvement and support programmes from which LAs can choose.

Regional leads and the CIB should consider collating and sharing common tools and templates to prevent LAs reinventing the wheel. A repository for these could be developed and shared with DCSs alongside the data profiles. This would be particularly useful for teams that are new to the process. We would recommend that the use of these tools and templates should be optional, however.

Where regions or LAs are developing similar processes and procedures, the CIB should collate and share these nationally through their regular newsletters and events.

The CIB might consider working with regional leads to collate and share best practice examples of short, evidence-based, well structured reports. It could also discuss with ADCS colleagues the value of using a consistent language and common descriptors in feedback outputs.

The CIB needs to support LAs to evidence how peer challenges and reviews are being taken forward within LAs; this will support the CIB and LAs to evaluate the impact of sector-led improvement and support work.

4.3 Recommendations for lead members and DCSs

Clarifying sector-led improvement programmes of support

DCSs have a responsibility to share the differences between the peer challenge and review programmes with their staff to prevent confusion about the different models of support being introduced to their LA.

Programme delivery

The level of lead member and corporate engagement should be decided at the outset, when LAs discuss the ground rules for sector-led improvement and support programmes. We recommend lead members should be fully informed of and involved in scoping the topic for peer challenge or review. Their further involvement in the process should be appropriate to the particular situation of the LA.

We recommend that DCSs and those responsible for driving forward this work in LAs inform service leaders, managers and front-line workers that this model offers a supportive framework for improvement to support engagement. DCSs should be responsible for buy-in up and down the LA.

DCSs in both LAs (those offering challenge and those receiving it) should discuss expectations around the ways in which peer challenge and review days are deployed early on in the process.

At the outset, DCSs need to ensure they discuss ground rules with the teams offering and receiving the challenge, to clarify expectations.

DCSs need to ensure that the people involved in sector-led improvement have the appropriate skills, confidence and expertise to carry out the role effectively.

4.4 Next steps for evaluation

The CIB and LGA asked us to consider next steps for the evaluation of the early adopter programme. Based on the evidence collected to date, we suggest the following issues require further investigation:

- how LAs decide their area of focus for sector-led improvement, the appropriateness of a narrow or broad focus within different settings and the impact of the different approaches adopted by LAs
- the deployment of the gifted time and which approaches offer the greatest level of challenge and support to bring about improvement
- the extent to which LAs with high Ofsted ratings are learning from others and vice versa (in other words the appropriateness of sector-led improvement for high achieving LAs and those with declining or poor performance)
- the extent to which Ofsted inspectors use sector-led improvement findings when they inspect a LA that has been involved in receiving peer challenge or review
- whether the improvement programme provides regular 'health checks' to support the sectors' development between Ofsted inspections
- the development of a national evaluation framework to be used by LAs to help them to demonstrate the value and impact of sector-led improvement work.

5 Conclusions

Our evaluation shows that the early adopter programme is still in its early stages of implementation within and across LAs. There is some confusion about the differences between the various sector-led improvement programmes, which needs to be addressed. We recommend that the CIB and LGA consider combining all sector-led improvement programmes into one clearly defined menu of sector-led activity.

Despite the early stage of development, the commitment and drive from DCSs, lead members and service managers is positive and very encouraging. It bodes well for the future. There is understanding that the entire sector needs to buy into this way of working if it is to have a future. To help ensure that the early adopter programme has credibility across and beyond the sector, the active support of ADCS and LGA will be paramount in the future. In addition, lead members and chief executives' support is vital to help ensure the programme has engagement from all LAs. There is an important role for DCSs in supporting their colleagues to understand this way of working. Service managers and team managers must also engage and buy into the ethos, as they will be the people driving through change.

The model is considered to be fit for purpose for LAs with any Ofsted inspection judgement. However, the system must remain flexible enough to accommodate

the needs of different LAs. Establishing ground rules and a common understanding about the overall programme and individual peer challenge and review activity is considered vital.

As we would expect, given the early stage of development of the early adopter programme, there are some areas for development. These are certainly not insurmountable, but addressing them will require the collective involvement and agreement of the CIB, LGA and ADCS. One particularly key activity that we recommend needs to take place is the production of a robust framework to support LAs to measure change and evidence impact. This will help to ensure the early adopter programme continues to be used by LAs and becomes embedded in practice.

Overall our evaluation shows that engagement in the early adopter programme is promising and developing. Where LAs have embarked on a peer challenge or review, generally they are overwhelmingly positive about its potential benefits and commitment to this way of working seems strong. There is, however, still a long way to go to ensure that this programme of work has engagement from the entire sector and, ultimately, brings about improvement in outcomes for localities' children and young people populations. Policy makers, the CIB, LGA and ADCS have a crucial role to play in ensuring this is realised.

Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/



Targeting children's centre services on the most needy families

This report shows how children's centres and local authorities are focusing their services on the 'most needy' families. Drawing on a review of policy and research, together with case studies of work in six English local authorities, it features a concept map, practice examples and recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners.

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGTC01>



Developing a business case for early interventions and evaluating their value for money

What constitutes a good business case for early interventions and how should it be assessed? This report offers guidance that will be of use to local authorities (LAs) and their partners in their decision-making and planning on early interventions, based on a review of the evidence base

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/EITS01>



National census of local authority councillors 2010

The Councillor Census provides a 'snapshot' of local government representation and, with previous years' data, analysis of trends over time. It covers councillors' views on their work and role, along with demographic information on councillors. This report presents the findings from the sixth Census of local authority councillors in England.

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGUX03>

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In a drive to improve support to local authorities (LAs) and enhance performance the Department for Education (DfE) and the Children's Services sector agreed a new system of support. The Children's Improvement Board (CIB) was created to lead the strategic direction and development for sector-led improvement and support in children's services. To date, its work has focused on the development of the 'early adopter programme'.

This report captures LAs' perceptions on the early adopter programme and sector-led improvement and support more widely. The report findings will be of relevance to the CIB, the LGA and the sector in their work.