



executive summary

evaluation of the early adopter sector-led improvement programme pilots

Claire Easton, Helen Poet, Helen Aston and Robert Smith

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.

Further information

For more information about this report visit www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SLIP01 or email Claire Easton at c.easton@nfer.ac.uk



This project was funded by
the Local Government
Education and Children's
Services Research Programme



National Foundation for
Educational Research
The Mere, Upton Park
Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ

tel: +44 (0) 1753 574123
fax: +44 (0) 1753 691632
email: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk
www.nfer.ac.uk
© NFER 2012