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Contents

Acknowledgements **v**

Executive summary **vi**

1 Introduction **1**
1.1 Aims of research 1
1.2 Methodology 1

2 Regional approaches **2**
2.1 Regional lead involvement 2
2.2 Regional methodologies 2

3 Impact **8**
3.1 Practice examples 8
3.2 Trust, openness, transparency and self-awareness 9
3.3 Building relationships and sharing good practice 10
3.4 Skills, knowledge and understanding 10
3.5 Professional development opportunities 11
3.6 Impact on children and families 12
3.7 Measuring impact 13

4 Perceptions on the model **14**
4.1 Credibility of the model 14
4.2 Other improvement initiatives 14
4.3 Regional programme manager role 15
4.4 Perceptions on value for money 16
4.5 Improvement and Impact Assessment Framework 17

5 Issues, challenges and sustainability **19**
5.1 Capacity, commitment and culture 19
5.2 Skills 19
5.3 Data 20
5.4 Time and funding 21
5.5 Evidencing change 22
5.6 Central government priorities 22
5.7 CIB, councils and cross-regional working 22
5.8 Regional plans for the future 22

6 Key messages for stakeholders **24**
Recommendations for lead-stakeholders 24
Recommendations for challenge teams 24
Recommendations for host councils 24
Recommendations for Government and Ofsted 25

7 Conclusions **26**

Reference **28**

Appendix A Summary of regional approaches **29**

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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 independent evaluation of the sector-led peer challenge programme.

The peer challenge programme is an integral part of the sector-led improvement programme. Since its inception, the peer challenge programme has evolved. While originally conceived as a centrally run system with a number of 'early adopter' councils, peer challenge has developed on a regional basis. Each region now has its own programme manager, a lead-Chief Executive, a lead-Lead Member for Children's Services, and a lead-Director of Children's Services (DCS) who drive forward the regional approach. Each of these key individuals was invited to participate in telephone interviews during January 2013 to inform the research.

The research team explored the various delivery models across the nine regions. Building on the previous illuminative evaluation of the peer challenge early adopter programme, (Easton *et al*. 2012), this research focused on impact, efficiency and effectiveness of the programme in achieving its aims. It also sought to explore sustainability of the model.

Key findings

NFER's research shows that there continues to be a strong commitment to the sector-led peer challenge programme at a national and regional level. Stakeholders perceive the model to:

- be credible
- offer good value for money
- improve practice.

Most regions have developed a model that is fit for purpose. Each model has been developed in collaboration with DCSs and often lead members. Some regions have a more established model in place, most often building on their experiences of the early adopter programme. Others, however have a more embryonic and developmental structure in place. Despite these differences, regional stakeholders were able to give examples of impact as a result of the peer challenge programme. Although few examples of hard evidence were given, stakeholders reported:

- improving service provision (for example, around safeguarding practice, looked-after children and early years education)
- mobilising early help to councils most in need (for example, identifying councils with areas of declining performance and organising local support to help them improve)
- developing relationships and reinvigorating regional networks and groups to facilitate shared learning (for example, lead member, DCS and assistant director groups)
- creating a culture of openness, trust, self-reflection and challenge (for example, with councils asking for help where a problem emerged and councils being truly honest about their areas for development)
- providing a range of professional development opportunities for a number of stakeholders, including councillors and partner agencies (for example, through leadership programmes, succession planning and formal training or practice seminars)
- informally and formally sharing good practice outside of the peer challenge programme (for example, through teams within an individual council offering challenge and support to one another and through other local networks, forums and seminars).

While progress has been good with almost all councils being involved in a peer challenge during 2012/13, a small number of councils remain reluctant to engage. Although all councils should have received a peer challenge by December 2012, where these have not

been undertaken, it was usually due to inspections or councils being in intervention.

Looking back to the early adopter programme, it is clear that progress has been made. While some of the challenges reported in the previous evaluation remain, such as funding, time, capacity and willingness to engage, these appear less prominent.

Areas for development

NFER's data shows more needs to be done at national and regional levels to collect evidence of change. This is because **current practice around measuring impact is patchy**.

Regions would welcome timely and accurate local information so regions and councils can monitor their improvement journey over time. This will also help regions identify where individual councils need additional support. Indeed, **self-assessment activity was perceived to be critical** to the success of the programme.

All regions plan to develop their approach to meet the changing needs of individual councils; CIB developments (for example, Social Work Associate Practice (SWAP)); and national developments (for example, new inspection framework).

The peer challenge is seen as **one element of the wider self-improvement agenda**. Many regions have aligned their peer challenge activity with leadership programmes and succession planning. This is an encouraging development and should help promote sustainability of the peer challenge programme.

Cross-regional working should be promoted to ensure good practice is shared. This need not be a costly development and could be facilitated via existing online forums.

1 Introduction

In 2011, the Local Government Association (LGA) agreed to oversee whole council approaches to self-improvement in line with the Coalition Government's drive towards localism. As part of the delivery of this agenda, the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) was created to lead the strategic direction and development of a system for sector-led improvement and support for children's services. The Board consists of representatives from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the LGA. CIB is grant-funded by the Department of Education (DfE) in addition to drawing from in-kind contributions from within the sector.

During 2012, the Government announced that it would continue to grant-fund CIB's work for another year. However, this decision was later revoked and, at the time of writing, the partners on CIB are planning to make transitional arrangements for different elements of the work programme. Peer challenge organised through regions was always mainly dependent on in kind support from councils rather than external funding and it is likely that it will continue in some form in the future.

The peer challenge programme is an integral part of the sector-led improvement programme. Since its inception the peer challenge programme has evolved. The programme has moved from a centrally run system to one where each of the nine regions in England has developed its own model for delivery. Each model was intended to link closely to the CIB regional delivery plan. During 2012/13, each region has had its own programme manager, a lead-Chief Executive, a lead-Lead Member for Children's Services, and a lead-Director of Children's Services (DCS) driving forward the regional approach. The intention was that all councils should have received a sector-led peer challenge by the end of December 2012.

1.1 Aims of research

CIB and LGA commissioned NFER to carry out an external evaluation of the peer challenge programme. The research team explored the various delivery models across the nine regions. Building on the previous illuminative evaluation of the peer challenge early adopter programme, (Easton *et al*. 2012), this research focused on impact, efficiency and effectiveness of the programme in achieving its aims. We also sought to explore sustainability of the model.

1.2 Methodology

The research team adopted a two-stage methodology. Initially we reviewed each region's delivery plan. We created a pro-forma which focused on process which we sent to programme managers. This supported the research team's understanding of each region's approach thus supporting the second stage of the research: telephone interviews. The research team contacted all lead-DCSs; lead-lead members; lead-chief executives; programme managers and a nominated assistant director from a council in each region. We carried out a total of 43 telephone interviews between December 2012 and January 2013. We were unable to secure interviews with two lead-Chief Executives and one lead-Lead Member. We carried out one additional programme manager interview within one region.

2 Regional approaches

This section outlines the different regional approaches taken. It provides an overview of how lead-stakeholders became involved in the programme. This section summarises how councils were matched; how priority or topic areas were decided and stakeholder engagement in the peer challenge process. It also outlines preparation activities for the peer challenges.

2.1 Regional lead involvement

Each region has a lead-Chief Executive, lead-Lead Member for Children's Services and a lead-DCS. Across the regions, these key stakeholders became involved in the programme in one of three ways. They were either nominated, volunteered or the role of the lead-CIB position came with other responsibilities. For DCSs, many were leading regional succession planning or were the ADCS representative for the region. The lead-CIB peer challenge role sat alongside these other responsibilities.

Regional programme managers became involved in the sector-led peer challenge through a number of routes. Some regions appointed a project manager; some employed an ex-DCS while others had joined the CIB regional programme manager role to other local sector-led improvement work. When recruiting programme managers, some regions adopted an open recruitment process, some identified a preferred bidder and others asked the programme manager to undertake the role based on previous or current regional work. Further information about the perceived benefits and challenges associated with the role are reported below in Chapter 4.

2.2 Regional methodologies

This section briefly summarises the regional approaches to the peer challenge.

2.2.1 Approaches

Across the nine regions, each adopted a different approach. Some favoured a more structured approach with regular cycles (for example, the East Midlands and Eastern regions), whereas others were more informal and developmental (for example, the South West and Yorkshire and Humber). Some of these decisions were influenced by local contexts, predominately the number of councils in intervention. Furthermore, some councils were at an earlier stage on their sector-led improvement journey than others.

Across the regions, examples of the different approaches adopted include:

- Some regions had an overarching regional board assessing and quality assuring each council's self-assessments.
- Regions quickly mobilised support from councils across the region to support individual councils that were in urgent need of support following self-assessment activities.
- Regions aligned the peer challenge programme with leadership and succession planning programmes.
- Regions enhanced the peer challenge programme offer by running expert panels, seminars and conferences on regional priority areas.
  - One region hosted events, instead of a peer challenge visit. Two councils would spend dedicated time (usually one and half days) critiquing each council's approach to their chosen topic. This activity is supported by sector specialists and national speakers. They reconvene after six weeks to assess progress and review action plans.
- Some regions developed sub-regional working, for example, Best Practice Networks; indeed, others are looking to develop sub-regional working for 2013/14.
- During 2012, some regions had focused the peer challenge programme on poorer performing councils rather than those that are rated 'good' or 'outstanding' in order to drive forward improvement

at a regional level. This balance will shift in the future, however.

- One region brought together small groups of councils in triads to peer challenge one another on the same topic area.

- Some councils sought peer challenge and support from other regions.

While some approaches seemed to be more established than others, every region reported benefits of their model (see Chapter 3 below) and all described how the model would be evolving in the short-term future. This illustrates that lead stakeholders across the regions perceive sector-led improvement as a developmental journey that needs to be fluid in responding to their individual and evolving needs.

2.2.2 Topic areas

The research team wanted to find out how the topic areas for individual council's peer challenges were chosen. A varied picture emerged with some regions identifying regional priorities whilst other regions allowed councils to choose their own topics on which to focus their peer challenge.

Where **regional priorities** were set, individual councils were expected to choose the focus for their peer challenge from a pre-defined and agreed list. When setting priorities at a regional level, this task was often led by a steering group (mainly comprising DCSs). They looked at each council's self-assessment to identify regional areas for development. Often this task was carried out in collaboration with others, including, for example, a peer challenge management sub-group, leadership teams, regional sub-groups and/or with performance data analysts. Within some regions, this task was heavily influenced by national priorities such as those established by CIB or central government (for example, Munro, safeguarding, child protection and adoption and fostering). Where regional priorities were identified, there was often some flexibility for individual councils to choose a different topic area if their self-assessment showed a different area required more urgent attention. Often a deviation from the pre-defined regional priorities had to be agreed by the regional lead-DCS.

For those regions where **individual council priorities** were established, each council had the freedom to select its own topic for a peer challenge. Councils based these decisions on self-assessment and/or other local data. An interviewee in one region argued that enabling councils to choose their own areas for peer challenge could further facilitate engagement in the programme, possibly because it makes it a less prescriptive model.

Individual councils chose a range of topics for the peer challenges, these included:

- child poverty

- corporate parenting and looked-after children (LAC)

- diverting children from care

- domestic abuse

- early intervention

- children's centres and early years

- integrated disability service and adoption of children with a disability

- integration of public health services into council settings

- justice reviews and troubled families/Munro

- special educational needs (SEN)

- young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and youth services.

The rationale for adopting each region's approach seemed to vary. Some interviewees talked about the need to have a strong regional understanding of need to ensure all councils within the region were performing to the desired standard. For others, historic circumstances and contexts of the individual councils led to a specific approach being adopted. These factors included, for example, level of council engagement with the peer challenge programme; the extent to which councils collaborated and had mutual trust; and issues related to individual council's performance.

Once individual councils had identified which topic area they wanted exploring as part of their peer challenge, this was often quality assured by the challenge team. This seemed to be a key feature across the regions. They were keen to ascertain (and in some cases, confirm) that the council had accurately identified where it required support and improvement. This was true for councils in regions that had adopted regional priorities and for those where individual council priority areas were identified.

2.2.3 Matching councils

During the interviews, the research team asked interviewees how councils were 'matched' for the peer challenges. A range of methods were undertaken. In most regions, this was conducted by the programme manager in discussion with the lead-DCS or the regional group. A matrix showing the matches and associated timetable was then drawn up and agreed with the host council and the peer challenge team. The matching processes took account of personal or relationship issues between DCSs. While generally DCSs appeared to be happy with their matching, in some regions individual councils were not. This was negotiated between councils and lead-stakeholders. Within one region, the Chief Executive worked with the DCS to match councils but this was unusual.

Across the other regions, different approaches were adopted. These included self-selection; adopting what was described as an 'almost random' system or a partial self-selection process. In this latter case, each council was asked to identify its own strengths and where it would be willing to offer challenge and support to others.

In all regions a rationale, however loose, was applied for making the judgements for matching councils. Interviewees noted that this was not always an easy task and that it took time. A range of criteria was used for matching councils, these included:

- using Ofsted judgements and/or performance indicators
- LA type (i.e. county, unitary, etc.), geography, and/or size (population and geography)
- matching councils that have a single children's and adults' directorate
- not using a neighbouring council
- assessing individual council's capacity to engage (particularly those in intervention)[1]
- building on pre-existing relationships or respect for individual peer's qualities and skills
- matching one council's strength to another council's area for development.

Although most regions did not pair councils with their neighbours for objectivity reasons, in a small number of regions, some councils were happy to be peer challenged by their neighbour. Where councils were happy to peer challenge a neighbour, this sometimes stemmed from logistical issues, such as time and travel. Others reported that councils may benefit from a peer challenge by a neighbour depending on the topic area. The rationale was that councils might be having ongoing conversations about specific families or staff may work with similar partners (such as the same health authority).

Some regions sought expertise and resource from other regions in order to best meet the needs of the individual councils. This approach was generally adopted, so a high-performing council (from any region) could support and challenge a weaker council that had identified a specific area for development. The host council wanted to learn from a level of expertise that was perhaps not available within their own region.

Other considerations related to the appropriateness of matching a large rural and a small urban council. Within one region, interviewees were clear that both could mutually learn from the experience whereas other regions took the opposing view. They argued that asking a small council to visit a large one would be overly burdensome.

In some regions there were additional challenges in making suitable matches. Examples of these challenges included: councils falling into special measures or on notices to improve; Ofsted inspections meaning dates of

1 A number of regions made the decision to not include councils that were in special measures.

peer challenges being moved; DCSs moving or retiring; and capacity issues.

For some, these issues affected progress in conducting peer challenges to the required deadline. However, interviewees accepted that there needed to be an element of flexibility in the programme to accommodate other demands placed on councils.

2.2.4 Stakeholder engagement

Planning the peer challenge programme

Across all regions, DCSs were involved in planning the regional peer challenge programme and their own peer challenge activity. However, in some regions, an operations group was set up as an alternative to the DCSs being involved. This group was assigned by the DCS and comprised third tier officers, often with performance or workforce experience. Where performance and data specialists were involved, this helped to ensure data was being correctly interpreted.

Similarly, lead members were often involved in the initial stages and early discussions. Their involvement related to both regional strategic priorities and local council issues. It was generally recognised that involving lead members in the peer challenge process provided them with an opportunity to give a political steer into the region's overall areas of strategic challenge. Furthermore, it helped to raise their level of awareness of children's services issues and supported the development of honest conversations with other elected members.

Interviews with most chief executives revealed that they were kept informed about when peer challenges were taking place and provided with feedback afterwards. Generally, chief executives took a decision not to be involved in peer challenges directly. However, some interviewees reported that chief executives had been directly involved in a challenge visit. One chief executive explained that staff at a practitioner level should also be involved in the peer challenge visits.

Interviewees spoke about the role of the programme managers in preparing for peer challenges. They provided a crucial role in the process, managing and coordinating the programme overall. Their role often involved matching councils in discussion with the DCSs, setting up a matrix and timetable for the peer challenge process and regularly reviewing progress. A few programme managers reported that this process could be both time consuming and complex, particularly where councils were dealing with inspections or personnel changes.

Other bodies that were kept informed and included in the peer challenges were the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the regional branch of the Association of Directors of Children's Services or LGA.

Many regions provided support for the peer challenge process in the form of training sessions, workshops, regional or local seminars and conferences. Participants included Chief Executives, DCSs, lead members, others involved in the peer challenge process and sometimes partner agency representatives.

Peer challenge visits

Peer challenge visits were generally led by a DCS. DCSs were supported by staff with relevant expertise and experience. These generally included second and third tier officers but in some cases also included fourth and fifth tiers. Across most regions, the data shows that regions and councils were putting together a team that best met the needs of the council receiving the challenge.

Partner agencies were generally not involved in the peer challenge process but there were some examples of health and voluntary sector involvement. More importantly, the interviewees across all regions said they wanted to engage partner agencies in the future, in part in response to Ofsted multi-agency inspections. Health colleagues were often involved in wider sector-led work, such as training and workforce development events across a small number of regions and regions wanted to build on this through peer challenge visits.

Overall children and young people had not been engaged in the peer challenge process directly. Some reported indirect involvement through the information and data being used in preparing for and during the peer challenge visits. However, when asked, interviewees said that children and young people could get involved in peer challenges where it was appropriate to the topic area.

2.2.5 Preparing for a peer challenge

Regions used a range of data sources to support their self-assessments and peer challenge preparation. Individual councils used both 'hard' and 'soft' data. Data sources tended to include Ofsted inspection reports, development or improvement plans, financial data, audits, Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNA); committee reports and local performance data. In addition, councils used local qualitative data; this included consultation data, 'anecdotal' feedback from service managers, front line staff and service users. Interviewees in one region spoke about having a 'pull' system for information gathering whereby the challenger team requests additional salient sources. This is opposed to a 'push' system whereby the host council sends lots of information which can make preparation an unmanageable task. For this region, for 2012, they specifically revised their method following involvement in the early adopter programme.

Several interviewees noted the limitation of the Atkins Data Profiles when talking about preparing for the peer challenge. The data was considered to be too 'high level'. Linked to this a number of interviewees talked about the need for CIB to develop up-to-date, robust, useful performance data for regions and nationally. Some regions had already started to develop their own data models, or key performance indicators, to assist them in identifying regional priorities and, in some cases, to loosely 'benchmark' councils.

Some interviewees spoke about the need for a reliable predictor for inspection results whereas others disagreed, stating that sector-led improvement is different and should not be aligned to Ofsted in this way. The majority of interviewees felt that the peer challenge and sector-led improvement more generally is only as good as the council's self-assessment. Data, in the right format and at the right level, could support regions and councils to prepare for improvement.

Frameworks and handbooks

While there was some variability between the approaches, most regions had agreed a framework. Generally, these were written up and agreed by all DCSs during their early planning conversation. In most cases these formal frameworks were adhered to, but within a small number of regions, this was not the case. Where an agreed approach was not followed, this seemed to relate to the engagement of individual councils or regions working in pre-existing sub-regional groups and thus not wanting to change these linkages. Reported challenges associated with the sector-led improvement model are discussed in Chapter 5.

Supporting each region's framework was a published 'handbook' or guide. These were designed to support individual councils with the entire process. While these were not intended to be prescriptive documents, they did outline ground rules or expectations for the peer challenges and wider sector-led improvement work. Interviewees considered the handbooks and guidance to be important in helping to develop an ethos and culture of openness and honesty. Some region's handbooks and guidance appeared to be more detailed in setting out the expectations (for example, outlining the skills of peer challenge team members) whereas others focused more on the 'principles and values' of the programme.

Across the regions, specifically, ground rules seemed to relate to:

- Information sharing
  - This included outlining what information should be given to help peer challenge teams prepare for a peer challenge; stating the parameters by which any information gathered or reported through the peer challenge process would or could be shared (specifically related to external bodies).
- Openness and honesty
  - This included outlining an expectation for councils to be honest and open in their self-assessment and during their peer challenge visits. Furthermore, it included the peer challenge team having, what was described by some as a 'no surprises policy' for feeding back key messages. Stating these expectations, it was argued, helped develop an open culture around peer challenge and wider sector-led improvement work.
- Escalation agreements
  - Many regions had an agreed 'escalation policy' for their peer challenges. This meant that there was an agreed protocol should any issues of concern arise during a peer challenge. Furthermore this policy detailed what would happen if a DCS, or others, refused to accept the findings of the

peer challenge team. Some regions developed a 'moderator' role or involved a third party (often another council) to quality assure the findings or to facilitate if disparities between councils occurred.

2.2.6 Time commitment

The research team asked interviewees how long they felt it took to prepare for a peer challenge. The feedback was relatively consistent across the nine regions with those asked saying preparation took between a few hours (often closer to around half a day) to a couple of full days. This time was often spent reviewing self-assessment data so the peer challenge team had a full understanding of the issues and were confident that the self-assessment had identified the right area for development. In addition to this time, team leaders (in almost all cases this was a DCS) would spend time liaising with the receiving council to request further information and make the necessary arrangements (this may take up to a day). Generally challenger team officers used this time over weeks, or in some cases, months before the peer challenge visit. The time invested was considered worthwhile by all of those asked.

2.2.7 Links with succession planning

In most regions, the peer challenge was closely aligned to regional succession planning programmes. Some regions had a very structured programme whereby officers had to be nominated (by their DCS) and trained before they could be involved in a peer challenge team. Across the regions where formal links had not yet been created, regional representatives talked about the need to align peer challenge and succession planning more closely. One DCS talked about the need to not only develop leaders for the future within children's services, but that they need to develop senior leaders and managers who can work within a single adults' and children's services directorate.

Appendix A shows a tabular summary of each region's approach.

3 Impact

This chapter reports interviewees' perceptions on the impact of the peer challenge programme. It discusses the impact of the peer challenge on strategic leaders, practitioners and service users.

3.1 Practice examples

While the peer challenge has started to improve practice, particularly in councils receiving early support, interviewees in most regions felt that it was too early to identify whether it had improved outcomes.

The peer challenge had started to impact on practice by helping councils to clarify and define areas for improvement. It had helped to refresh and reinvigorate practice by encouraging leaders to take a fresh look at issues in their areas, perhaps from a different perspective. Some specific examples include:

- Peer challenge visits have helped councils improve their safeguarding practices. Interviewees felt that the peer challenge has been effective in defining the issues that underpin inadequate performance and that it offered strategies for addressing these.

- Peer challenges have supported councils with early support and front door procedures. Specifically, the peer challenge teams helped one council improve the way it dealt with referrals and engaged with partner agencies. For this council, the peer challenge informed a service restructure.

- The peer challenges have helped one region improve practice for complex placements for looked-after children (LAC). Since introducing new commissioning arrangements, resulting from the peer challenge activity, complex placements for LAC are no longer contracted out to providers at a regional level. Interviewees hoped that this will ultimately improve outcomes for the LAC concerned.

- A peer challenge focusing on early years education helped one council to identify that practitioners required additional support in order to address the attainment drop at key stage 1. Participating councils produced a toolkit to assess practitioner support needs at key stage 1. This has since been rolled out across the region.

Other examples include:

- The peer challenge process reinvigorating councils to address an issue that they had already recognised as an area of possible concern. The peer challenge gave the impetus to focus on the problem; furthermore, for some, it highlighted a new but related issue.

- Councils shared practice examples and policy documents formally during the peer challenge activity but also, informally, after the visits were complete.

- The peer challenges gave some officers the confidence to have conversations with senior leaders about areas of difficulty. For some this has resulted in additional support and resource being deployed.

3.1.1 Identifying areas of underperformance

Interviewees from most regions identified that the peer challenge had effectively identified councils in need of early support. Furthermore, it had helped a small number of councils recognise specific areas of declining or concerning performance. For some, these issues had been identified through the self-assessment process not the peer challenge visit itself. In some regions, for example, when the DCS group reviewed each council's self-assessment, they identified councils with specific areas of concern. Support was mobilised to prevent any further decline. Indeed, across the regions, where areas of concern had been identified through the peer challenge, extra support was put in place for these councils in a more timely way.

Local trend data was being used in one region to support individual councils to identify how they were performing over time. While some of these councils were not failing, having access to this information helped them to realise that while their performance was

adequate, it could be better, particularly when assessing this alongside other councils' data.

Appropriateness of the peer challenge for identifying declining performance

Implicit in interviewees' comments was that the peer challenge was part of wider sector-led improvement work. This issue was pertinent when discussing the role of the peer challenge in identifying councils with declining performance. Some described the peer challenge as one tool amongst many that would support regions and councils to improve practice and outcomes. Other interviewees, however, indicated that the peer challenge was not the right mechanism for identifying declining performance per se. They felt that using the peer challenge in this way could be counter-productive, as it could 'advertise' weaker areas rather than support them. This view was held particularly in regions where a number of councils were already in receipt of targeted support.

Others disagreed and saw the peer challenge as effective in identifying serious issues which placed councils at risk of going into intervention. A number of interviewees talked about the need for councils to take action and ownership themselves to prevent the threat of intervention from becoming reality. Perhaps as the programme becomes embedded within regions, and as councils develop an increasingly reflective way of working, this aim may be achieved.

> *The peer challenge in my mind is primarily about preventing authorities slipping into serious problems or into intervention. I think there is a separate improvement challenge about rescuing authorities that are slipping into serious problems once they have done that.*

Inspection framework

Most regions stated that peer challenges could help prepare councils for formal inspection. Some interviewees talked about the need for peer challenge to be responsive so it could help councils identify a need before an inspection took place. Post-inspection, councils also found it useful to compare and contrast the outcomes of inspections with those of the peer challenges to target effort and support.

Interviewees welcomed the softer and more supportive approach of the peer challenge compared to the 'name and shame' of formal inspections when identifying areas of declining performance. They felt that this helped to increase the impact of the peer challenge, which would ultimately raise practice standards. As one interviewee stated:

> *My view is this could have much more impact than the slightly reactive and defensive reaction you get from Ofsted inspections, so my aspiration would be that we would be working to lift all our practice so that none of it falls below satisfactory and most of it is shifting into the good area.*

Interviewees reported that recent experience of the peer challenge process increased councils' confidence when facing inspections. The peer challenge visits helped staff feel better informed about their weaker areas and the action put in place to address these. This ultimately strengthened their approach to the inspection process and conversations with inspectors.

3.2 Trust, openness, transparency and self-awareness

Unanimously, interviewees agreed that the peer challenge programme had helped foster a culture of trust, openness and transparency. Interviewees felt that the peer challenge had helped to embody a cultural shift from competition to collaboration between councils. In addition, many interviewees stated that the extent of the openness and willingness to work in partnership had been an unexpected yet welcome impact of the peer challenge.

That said, the extent to which the peer challenge had developed an open culture varied between regions. In one region, for example, recent staffing changes meant time was needed before the culture could be embedded.

Not only was a culture of trust, openness and transparency beneficial because it facilitated partnership working during self-assessments and peer challenge visits; but it had wider benefits also. It supported councils to ask for help when a problem emerged. They realised that they were not alone in dealing with an issue.

3.2.1 Strategic buy-in

Interviewees reported that DCSs and council leaders were crucial in setting an example for the peer challenge programme within their council. Their engagement set the precedence for personnel working in the council. Strategic buy-in was facilitated by DCSs collaborating early on and owning the programme.

3.2.2 Self-awareness

Many interviewees felt that the peer challenge had improved the self-awareness of leaders and managers. They had become more open to others' viewpoints and were increasingly willing to try different approaches to improve practice. This, in turn, improved requests for early support and individuals' willingness to be proactive in seeking help. One interviewee explained:

> *We have created a very collaborative group of directors and assistant directors who are far more self-aware because they have been prepared to share … data and intelligence … that helps with identifying [issues] and getting in early rather than waiting for the headlines to hit the newspapers and then an improvement team going in to sort it out.*

In two regions, it was felt that the DCSs were not as self-aware as hoped, and that this had been highlighted through the peer challenge: 'it has been an effective way of highlighting the issues'. It was suggested that frequent staff changes and the recent transient nature of DCS roles had lessened self-awareness in these areas.

Analysis of the data shows that developing a culture of trust, openness and transparency seemed to be dependent on:

- buy-in, drive and commitment from strategic leaders
- recognising where a culture of openness was weak or absent but committing to change it
- carrying out sector-led improvement work in a non-defensive/threatening way
- not adopting 'inspection mode' or being overly critical
- undertaking peer challenge activity with an open mind
- recognising competing pressures such as inspections, capacity and the impact of policy changes.

All interviewees highlighted that openness and willingness to share information were essential for the future sustainability of the peer challenge. Fundamentally, without openness about strengths and weaker areas, practice across councils and regions would not improve.

3.3 Building relationships and sharing good practice

The peer challenge helped to create and develop relationships between councils and between regions. Most interviewees expressed that councils shared good practice to a greater extent as a result of the peer challenge.

Regional groups, such as those for lead members, DCSs, assistant directors and performance analysts further facilitated shared learning. Indeed, good practice sharing was a key outcome of attending the network groups for strategic leaders and lead members. The meetings also provided a useful forum for sharing information about performance, concerns and challenge, and were seen by some to have contributed to creating a 'better climate' for sector-led improvement. This shows evidence that the openness fostered through the peer challenge has started to filter through into other working groups which were unrelated to the peer challenge. In some areas interviewees reported that chief executives who were in contact inconsistently prior to the peer challenges now felt able to contact one another informally to discuss matters which arose in the course of their work. Furthermore, interviewees seemed committed to developing further links with partner agencies in the future. Specific developments to date have focused on health, Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) and the voluntary sector.

3.4 Skills, knowledge and understanding

Several interviewees said they had gained skills, knowledge and understanding through the peer challenge process itself. Some learning related to gaining insights into specific areas of practice or performance (see below) but for others it was about the

skills developed by being involved in the process. As one interviewee explained:

> *It was really helpful to come in and understand how the inspections work … how you frame, how you triangulate, how you check data, how you work with partners. So a thorough understanding of how that whole process can work. That is good for people's learning.*

Lead members

Reportedly, lead members across several regions had gained enhanced knowledge and understanding through the peer challenge process. Furthermore, interviewees reported that lead members' regional meetings had been reinstated or reinvigorated as a consequence of the peer challenge activity.

Lead members were also invited to attend seminars on the sector-led improvement process and some received specific training to support their engagement. Gaining additional insight through the meetings and seminars was reported to have boosted their confidence to tackle issues, and in one case, had contributed to additional funding being secured to address a specific area of concern. In general, interviewees also felt that lead members had gained a deeper insight into their own council's areas of work as well as other's.

Chief executives

Chief executives had also become better informed about the issues and processes in their councils through being directly involved in peer challenges in some regions. In one region, for example, chief executives received regular updates and short reports on the progress of peer challenges.

Second, third and fourth tier officers

Managers and front line staff had gained broader learning of how other councils operate. This was said to be transferable to their own council and would enhance their own performance and practice in future. The impact on second, third and fourth tier officers is discussed in section 3.5 below.

3.5 Professional development opportunities

Virtually all interviewees noted that the peer challenge provided a positive learning and professional development experience. This was the case for both the host councils and the peer challenger teams. The peer challenge visits and wider sector-led improvement work offered a range of formal and informal opportunities, including formal training, succession planning and progression opportunities and reciprocal learning and mentoring.

3.5.1 Formal training, succession planning and progression opportunities

Many regions had enhanced the peer challenge offer and developed regional training programmes as part of their wider sector-led improvement work. Interviewees reported that these cross-regional and cross-agency training sessions helped to foster positive working relationships between councils and, in some cases, with partner agencies as well. Some regions, for example, invited expert consultants or practising expert leaders to run sessions with a DCS. Experts included an Academy Principal or health leaders linked to Health and Well-being Boards or Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). Other regional learning events focused on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), social work practice and addressing child sexual exploitation. These talks had helped to raise knowledge and understanding of what good practice looked like in these policy areas.

Furthermore, regions offered training to peer challenge team members and lead members. Many regions already provided training and support through local leadership and/or succession planning programmes but others offered bespoke training and support specifically for the peer challenge. Almost all regional representatives explicitly recognised the need to link peer challenge and succession planning.

Some interviewees highlighted the need to coach those directly involved in the peer challenge visits to ensure that they approached the task with the necessary skill, tact and sensitivity. A small number of regions explicitly trained staff to become peer reviewers using the peer challenge programme. While this had yet to impact

measurably on practice, initial feedback on the newly trained peer reviewers was positive.

Others used the peer challenge programme to support the professional development of officers and councillors. Participating in the peer challenge fostered the skills, knowledge and understanding to facilitate others' progression. One interviewee explained:

> [I] *nominated my most capable manager … In terms of developing her, I think it is important ... I know other assistant directors who have nominated third tier managers to do it. It's not tied in to aspiring leaders but it's tied in to thinking who are the people in the next layer down who you might want to be in the succession.*

Interviewees were keen to point out that whilst this training was important, it should not become burdensome or bureaucratic. Most regions perceived training and development for the peer challenge alongside other work force development approaches.

3.5.2 Reciprocal learning and mentoring

Interviewees talked of the immense value of receiving a peer challenge but also of being involved in a challenge team. Not only did they value getting together with colleagues to share practice, they also felt that they learned from being a member of a peer challenge team. Being a peer challenge team member often clarified individuals' own insights into issues in their council through the process of helping others. Furthermore, even when offering challenge to a council with weaker performance, interviewees talked about the value of seeing others in practice and how the challenge team had taken things from the host council. Reciprocal learning came from observing practice, sharing documents and policies. One interviewee reflected:

> *It is always interesting to go to another authority and see how they do things and you always bring back something that is helpful to your authority … it is a really good way of learning.*

Interviewees, especially DCSs and assistant directors, valued the opportunity the peer challenge provided in allowing them dedicated time on one topic. Indeed, one DCS described being excited at the prospect of supporting a council on their identified priority area. Several interviewees noted that DCSs are rarely able to spend their time in this way due to competing work pressures. One interviewee explained:

> *I do think that doing peer* [challenge]*, doing that sort of work, gives you an insight on your own LA. It gives you ideas but it also, sometimes you can recognise a problem somewhere else, that was niggling away at you and you can see it more clearly having seen it somewhere else and when you are not responsible for it.*

Interviewees reported that assistant directors and heads of service had gained valuable knowledge and understanding by spending time with DCSs and other experienced staff. Some commented that the peer challenge afforded staff opportunities to work alongside DCSs which may not otherwise have arisen. To this effect, one interviewee said:

> *I have been working in children services for 15 years but I have never had this exposure to a director. It has been a complete master class to sit in a meeting and talk out loud, sift through evidence and sort it through … you can talk in class but being there alongside is important.*

Extending peer challenge activity

Some councils have developed internal peer challenges from the sector-led peer challenge programme. Led by third-tier officers or assistant directors, 'internal peer challenges' have similar aims and methodology to the regional programme but these are shorter and less resource intensive. Councils which operated internal peer challenges were currently discussing integrating them with the regional challenges.

3.6 Impact on children and families

Most interviewees expressed that it was too early to identify specific impacts of the peer challenge on children, young people and families. However, many emphasised that the entire purpose of the peer challenge was to improve services which will ultimately improve outcomes for these groups. One interviewee illustrates this point:

We can only say at this point that if we are tuning our services more and more to outcome and quality through this process then that is what it is all about. If it is not, then why do any of it anyway?

Several interviewees referred to their future plans to integrate feedback on service improvement from children, young people and adults into the process. This would improve impact measurement and enable it to be linked more closely to improvements brought about through the peer challenges.

Some interviewees talked about their hopes for Social Work Associate Practice (SWAP). SWAP is one of CIB's priority areas for 2013/14. SWAP will support councils to share social care expertise and capacity within and between councils to help improve service provision. Interviewees indicated that, if successful, SWAP should further support councils and regions in achieving their aim to improve outcomes for children.

3.7 Measuring impact

The extent to which regions were measuring impact varied. Some regions did not yet have clear plans in place for measuring change arising from peer challenges. Where this was the case, interviewees highlighted the importance of achieving a robust impact measurement and planned to do so in the future. They suggested using quality assurance (QA) processes combined with qualitative and quantitative evidence from a range of sources. Some regional representatives were awaiting the outcomes of this NFER report to help them plan future impact measurement.

In those regions where plans were in place for measuring impact, interviewees described various approaches. These included:

- developing a quality assurance and performance management toolkit
- Implementing the health-check methodology to identify early councils that need additional support
- tracking adoption timescales using adoption scorecards.

When asked about measuring impact of the peer challenge, some interviewees stated that it will be demonstrated during the next inspection cycle. While there was some concern about using inspection judgements in this way, particularly given the changes to the framework, some commented that this would provide ultimate evidence of impact.

4 Perceptions on the model

This chapter addresses perceptions on the peer challenge programme. It considers the perceived credibility of the model, how it aligns with other improvement initiatives; the effectiveness of the programme manager role and interviewees' perceptions on the value for money that the peer challenge programme offers. Finally, it presents interviewees' suggestions for developing CIB's Improvement and Impact Assessment Framework.

4.1 Credibility of the model

Generally interviewees felt that the peer challenge model is a credible model for self-improvement. This was largely due to the perception that the processes involved in the challenge make it credible. The general commitment of councils to the self-assessment activities has also enhanced credibility within the sector. Indeed, several interviewees pointed out that the self-assessment activities alone necessitated a level of honesty and openness.

> *We have to ensure that when we go in and have a peer challenge, that it is vigorous enough, and there has to be vigorousness in colleagues going in and doing a review on others. ...we are very clear in our region that we do want it to be a meaningful review and not something that is very nice and cosy. We have all agreed that we want something that is going to be worthwhile and your LA is going to get something out of it.*

Interviewees reported that the requirement to work with peers, and the levels of sharing and scrutiny involved in the peer challenge models helped ensure that the process was honest. Two interrelated issues were reported. Firstly, it was largely acknowledged that without honesty, councils would get little out of the process. A small number of interviewees reported that individual councils' self-assessments were becoming increasingly honest and thus councils were more self-aware. One interviewee explained:

> *I think they* [self-assessments] *are becoming a lot more effective. In the traditional inspection regime everyone used to talk everything up and sugar coat everything. Now I think there is a lot more honesty and self-awareness.*

Secondly, interviewees talked about not wanting to and not being able to 'fool' a peer. Another interviewee said:

> *It is very difficult to fool your peer. You might be able to fool a consultant; it's very difficult to fool a peer.*

Some interviewees felt that the credibility of the peer challenge programme did not always hinge on honesty, rather on openness and willingness to share. Interviewees reported that some councils only wanted to share what was considered 'appropriate' information. Within some regions, there was an element of concern which was exacerbated by a 'culture of fear' associated with the current assessment and inspection regime. Interviewees raised concerns about how information collected for the peer challenges (from self-assessment data to peer challenge feedback) would be accessed and/or used by external bodies (this is discussed in Chapter 5).

Audit trails were being kept as part of the peer challenge, but these were typically described as 'simple'. There was also a view that audit trails are not necessary in the peer challenge model, as the process itself is enough and ensures that all matters are identified and addressed.

4.2 Other improvement initiatives

Interviewees almost unanimously felt that the sector-led peer challenge complemented other improvement initiatives and leadership programmes (including succession planning, as discussed above). The peer challenge was recognised as one part of a series of sector-led improvement offers or as 'part of a toolkit' of self-improvement. Together, all of these programmes were felt to have a collective impact that could not be achieved by any programme or initiative alone.

Indeed, interviewees were clear that the peer challenge programme had a specific role and that it should not replace, but complement, other initiatives.

Interviewees made the obvious linkages between the peer challenge programme and adult services, corporate and safeguarding peer reviews. These programmes were thought to work well alongside one another. Interviewees felt that the peer challenge offered a more focused approach to sector-led improvement, however. One of its enablers to success is that it is not 'off the shelf' unlike some other programmes. Indeed, being involved in the peer challenge had led to some councils encouraging their lead members to engage in a LGA peer review.

Given the overlap with other improvement initiatives, some interviewees expressed concern that any potential duplication needed to be managed. Some suggested that councils should exercise caution when implementing the different approaches, as one interviewee explained:

> *It is complementary … but it needs to be careful that is does not duplicate; it needs to add value to other initiatives. If it duplicates, not only is it a waste of resources but it also guarantees people will turn off it.*

Interviewees within one region talked about their desire to better align the peer challenge programme and the safeguarding peer review activity in the future. This was particularly in light of CIB's introduction of SWAP. A small number of interviewees also suggested the need to better align children's services peer challenge with adult services peer reviews. While these are slightly different approaches, for councils with a single children's and adults' directorate, this is a development that needs consideration in the future (this is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5).

4.2.1 Links to Ofsted

Interviewees talked about the sector-led peer challenge programme as being complementary to the inspection framework. Some interviewees explained that they had used the Ofsted framework as a 'health checker' for self-assessment activity. As discussed above, it was common for some councils to use the peer challenge as part of their preparation for Ofsted inspections or post-Ofsted action planning.

Interviewees recognised that the peer challenge will not replace the inspection framework, nor was it intended to. Rather, the peer challenge was considered to offer opportunities for focused self-improvement developed from a premise of offering support and challenge and not a judgement alone. Some described the peer challenge as 'akin to a lighter-touch Ofsted' that relies on self-awareness. The inspection framework was felt to be broader, and to provide a valuable and necessary external evaluation. Interviewees were clear that the lines between inspection and peer challenge should not be crossed (this is discussed in greater detail in Section 4.5).

A small number of interviewees expressed concern that Ofsted inspectors did not really engage with the peer challenge model during inspections. One interviewee said '[Ofsted] didn't give peer challenge the credence that it should'. Some interviewees felt that, given their complementary nature, more should be done to align the findings from the two approaches. It was felt that this might further help the sector on its improvement journey.

4.3 Regional programme manager role

All but one interviewee stated that the regional programme manager role had been essential to the peer challenge programme. In many cases, the role was considered vital and as 'one of the key successes of the programme'. Interviewees shared the view that '[the programme] would not happen without the project manager' or that it would be chaotic trying to deliver a peer challenge without them. The following quote reflects the views of a number of interviewees:

> *The role is strong, credible and necessary … It is critical … It is literally the glue that binds everything together.*

Programme managers provide a link between regions and CIB but also cross-regionally. Not only were programme managers valued for their strategic insights and links with CIB, but at the local level, they were crucial in driving the programme and 'mobilising' participants. This was particularly useful where some DCSs were less willing to engage with the peer challenge programme. Indeed, programme managers

had the time to talk to DCSs and support them through the process as necessary.

The objectivity that the role gave was also valued. This independence offered credibility and gave licence to 'challenge our thinking'. As mentioned above, it also helped to galvanise staff into action:

> *They're kind of an irritant, but a useful one – I say useful in terms of they're the people that just keep coming up and saying 'have you done it?' in a way that any single LA will hold themselves to account or find a reason not to.*

The additional capacity that the role afforded was welcomed. A number of DCSs indicated that they would not be able to dedicate the time needed to manage the programme in the way the programme managers did. The coordination role that they played in establishing, facilitating or tapping into local, regional and national networks was critical. Despite the added capacity, in three regions, interviewees felt that greater management capacity was still needed.

4.3.1 Challenges

The main challenges of the role centred on a lack of time to dedicate to the peer challenge. Some interviewees reported programme managers spending disproportionate amounts of time with councils with the greatest need. For others, a challenge related to the CIB reporting requirements. These were considered particularly time consuming.

Interviewees from two areas reported that the programme manager role would benefit from better explanation and definition. This, it was felt, may better help engage councils. In one of the regions, reportedly, some DCSs regarded the programme manager as 'trampling on my turf'. This challenge was quickly overcome through communication and explanation.

The reported challenges associated with the role were not considered as insurmountable. Furthermore, they did not detract from the overall value and effectiveness of the role.

4.3.2 Suggested improvements

When asked if any improvements were needed to the programme manager role, interviewees gave very few suggestions. Some regions called for the role to continue in the future. Whilst in other regions, the role was recognised as not being sustainable in the future without funding. As such, these interviewees indicated that regions need to be clear about exit strategies and that others should be encouraged to undertake aspects of the programme manager role in preparation for the role diminishing.

Other suggested improvements for the role related to:

- offering a formal induction or training for programme managers
- employing high profile staff in the role.

Lastly, interviewees called for some clarity over the CIB's reporting expectations. Programme managers would welcome additional information and noted the need to keep bureaucracy surrounding the programme to a minimum.

4.4 Perceptions on value for money

There was an overwhelming perception that the peer challenge programme offers value for money. Indeed, not one interviewee questioned its cost-effectiveness. It was considered particularly cost-effective due to the training and development experience that it affords participating staff, thus building internal capacity and capability. One interviewee said:

> *The best training I have ever had is doing the peer review work … You get people into your authority who are really good and know what they're doing, but equally those people get really good broadening and training which in turn helps them to do their job better.*

While no formal value for money assessment had been carried out, interviewees unanimously felt that drawing on internal resources was more cost-effective than paying for external consultant support. Both the actual cost and the time limited nature of consultant support meant that the internal development opportunities of the peer challenge were seen as particularly valuable. Interviewees talked about the value of speaking the same language resulting in the challenge team being

able to visit the host council and start work immediately without the need to explain structures and processes. Furthermore, the peer challenge was seen as like-for-like investment.

The ongoing impact of the peer challenge once the actual visit is over was also considered crucial in being a cost-effective model. As one interviewee described:

> *If you hire a consultant, you pay the money and the consultant does what he does and goes away. It's expensive and there is no ongoing spin-off benefits.*

In addition to the individual council cost of being involved in a peer challenge, interviewees talked about the model being cost-effective in terms of offering early intervention. The programme was thought to offer value for money as it is based on a model of offering early help. As a result, it, therefore, avoids the more costly consequences of councils requiring intervention at a later stage. This is something that interviewees felt would be seen over time as the model shows its intended impact. One interviewee said:

> *It's a very cost-effective model … there are very expensive cost consequences of putting intervention in so it's there to try and avoid that in the first place, and try and use the resources we have in the family, rather than bring people in externally, often at quite high cost to sort out a problem once it has arisen.*

The programme manager role was thought to enhance the cost-effectiveness of the programme. It was seen as a central resource that gave momentum to the programme. Indeed, many DCSs commented that they would not have the resource or capacity to drive the programme in the way the programme managers had (see Section 4.3 for further details about the benefits and challenges associated with the programme manager role).

Other factors that interviewees perceived as enhancing the cost-effectiveness of the programme included:

- the value of sharing 'what works' regionally
- the fact that staff time is 'gifted' so councils are not paying anything additional for support and challenge
- the value of the reciprocal arrangements.

4.5 Improvement and Impact Assessment Framework

To support CIB to develop the Improvement and Impact Assessment Framework[2], which was issued for consultation during November 2012, the research team asked interviewees to identify three things that they felt the framework needs to do. A small number of interviewees declined to comment having already provided feedback to CIB or because they had not seen the framework at all or had not seen it for some time. Others, however, offered suggestions; the most frequent of which are set out below.

Despite some regions already undertaking or planning to undertake impact evaluations, interviewees commonly suggested that the framework should assist councils to measure outcomes and impact. Focusing on outcomes rather than processes, interviewees considered, was particularly important. In order to do this, they suggested that the framework should include data or performance indicators to allow for performance management and review. Data for local and national levels was considered helpful in providing councils with the necessary information to challenge and scrutinise services, and to help define what the issues are. It was also acknowledged that some measure of activity or outputs would be necessary to help councils to measure impact.

Interviewees said the framework needs to provide a benchmark and a 'source of real time data'. It was felt this will enhance councils' engagement and encourage them to refer to it. To achieve this aim, it needs to be 'credible' and 'high profile'. Interviewees also suggested that it would be helpful if the framework provided information and advice for councils and for it to have clear expectations. Furthermore, as well as describing what 'good' looks like it needs to focus on how to get to 'good' so that it can be an aid and reference point for councils wanting to move from 'inadequate' or 'adequate' to 'good' Ofsted judgements. In this respect, interviewees said examples of good practice would be useful.

It was also felt that the framework would benefit from some assessment of status. Interviewees indicated that the framework needs to state how it sits with

2 The framework is also known as 'What does 'good' look like?'

inspections, what political weight it has and how it can support corporate decision making and alignment.

Interviewees were keen for the framework to allow for differences between regions. They felt that the framework needed 'to allow for some localisation' and to 'give direction, but not be too prescriptive'. In a similar sense, a variety of interviewees said it was important that the framework is 'dynamic' and changes over time. There was a sense that it must be developmental and 'not static'. In particular, it needed to respond to changes in the Ofsted inspection framework in a timely manner.

Overall, interviewees were keen that the framework should not be bureaucratic or onerous. Similarly, calls for it to be 'usable', 'succinct' and to include 'layman' examples rather than take on a strategic focus were made.

> *I think a framework should be a framework. It shouldn't be a very long document. It should give a set of criteria by which you then define where you are and where you want to get to, and shows you how to measure impact. It should try and strip out some of the laborious process things.*

It was acknowledged that the Impact and Assessment Framework was currently under review, and there was a general sense that the framework would be potentially very useful for regions and councils.

5 Issues, challenges and sustainability

This chapter reports interviewees' perceptions of the challenges associated with the peer challenge model. It also discusses issues for sustainability; indeed, these two issues are closely related.

5.1 Capacity, commitment and culture

Many interviewees raised concerns about capacity, skills and commitment as key challenges to the current programme and its future development.

5.1.1 Capacity

Issues about capacity mainly related to the sustainability of the model in the future; however, a few challenges were also raised. Some of these challenges related to those regions that had a large number of councils in intervention. Some of these had sought expertise and support from other regions. Related to this issue, a small number of interviewees talked about the demands that might be placed on 'good' and 'outstanding' councils. Similarly, would these councils receive the level of challenge and support they needed from a lesser performing council?

Sustainability

When asked about sustainability of the model, capacity was often cited. The issue was closely linked to embedding the programme in day-to-day work. This would help ensure that the programme was not seen as an additional task. Related to this, interviewees talked about the need to ensure that middle managers and, in some cases, front line staff become involved in peer challenges. This will help ensure that there is a wider pool of people to engage in the programme and it would help ensure they have the right skills for working in a sector-led improvement environment. A number of interviewees talked about staff at these levels also being able to demonstrate impact on services and service users, possibly in a more direct way than senior leaders. One interviewee, however, talked about having 'dedicated capacity' and not necessarily 'large' capacity. Others talked about the need to mobilise support in a timelier manner in the future, particularly for councils that were in need of additional or early help.

5.1.2 Commitment and culture

The research data shows that for some councils, within some regions, DCS commitment to the model requires further development. A small number of interviewees talked about some peers being unwilling to engage; whereas others were reported as being reluctant to give honest accounts of their areas for development. The challenge appeared to be around developing a culture of honesty and openness within these councils. Some interviewees reported a further challenge about not wanting to waste time offering support and challenge to others if they were not prepared to be honest or did not want to work in this way.

To overcome this challenge, interviewees talked about the need for councils to realise that the peer challenge was not about accountability but is focused on improvement. Furthermore, they talked about councils being realistic about their expectations for a peer challenge noting that it should not be seen as an inspection. The fact that the programme is still in its infancy was cited as a possible reason for this culture existing in places, particularly given the historical nature of children's service colleagues working in what was described as a 'compliance culture' that was supported by more resources than are available today. Adopting a new sector-led way of working therefore seems to be a challenge for some.

5.2 Skills

Interviewees talked about having the right people involved in the peer challenges. While across the regions, a range of staff from different tiers were involved in the challenges, the concerns are applicable across the board. These relate to:

- ensuring councils accurately identify their areas for development, indeed many regions have involved data specialists to support data interpretation.

- concerns about the future capacity of having the right people with the right skills available to carry out peer challenge as demand possibly increases within specific factions of children's services.

- experienced children's services staff not necessarily having the right skills to offer challenge and support; there was a feeling amongst some that specific skills are required.

- whether feeding back negative messages to a peer may have a detrimental impact on relationships outside of the peer challenge environment unless these messages are handled with great tact and sensitivity. There was a feeling, that as regions develop cross-council steering groups or boards, in the future, this is likely to be less of an issue.

- staff needing to ensure they do not spend a disproportionate amount of time challenging others and not looking reflectively at their own performance and practice. There was no evidence that this was occurring, indeed the contrary appeared to be true, but this was raised as a concern by some.

Sustainability

Some regional representatives talked about the need, in the future, to better align the sector-led peer challenge and the adults' service peer review. While these two programmes are aligned, interviewees felt that more could be done to ensure these are complementary and do not duplicate. Some felt that there was disparity between the two models currently. For councils that had a single adults' and children's directorate, this was a pertinent issue for the future. They need to ensure their future leaders have the necessary skills to best support adults' and children's service delivery and saw the peer challenge programme as having a role to play in developing the workforce.

5.3 Data

Some interviewees reported challenges around data. These concerns related to:

- the availability of data

- accurateness of the self-assessments

- the sharing and publication of peer challenge information.

5.3.1 Availability of data

While the approaches to the peer challenges were different, most interviewees agreed that the success of the peer challenge process relies on the availability of accurate and up-to-date performance information.

Two key issues emerged. Firstly, some interviewees talked about the need for CIB or others to provide regions with performance data for the councils. Indeed, some regions have started to develop their own regional level data. This will help regions to track trends and identify where some councils are performing less well than others. Some interviewees said that in the future they would welcome CIB producing a data set or tool to support them in this critical task. This needs to build on the work of Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) and Atkins by being more relevant and up to date, and reflective of the latest Ofsted frameworks.

Secondly, interviewees talked about councils needing to have the most recent and/or detailed data available to the peer challenge team. Within some regions, data was not made available to peer challenge teams during 2012. Where this had not occurred, the issue seemed to be more about not knowing what was expected rather than unwillingness to share information. This issue is likely to dissipate as the programme becomes established and embedded.

5.3.2 Accuracy of data

Interviewees reported the need for the challenge team to be able to quality assure individual council's self-assessments. Peer challenge teams need to know that these are honest and accurate. While there was a feeling that generally councils were honest in their self-assessments, interviewees noted that challenge teams felt the need to check the correct areas for development had been identified. Skilled data analysts were involved in interpreting the data in many regions in an attempt to overcome this issue. Others employed a steering

group to oversee this task; these practices should be encouraged across all regions.

Sustainability

Interviewees reported a related concern about inaccurate self-assessment data undermining the credibility of the programme. Interviewees talked of a hypothetical situation where a peer challenge had been carried out with a council and then Ofsted carried out an inspection. If the messages were conflicting or the peer challenge had not identified areas of weakness or concern, interviewees felt that this could undermine the programme and the credibility of the peer challenge team. Evidence to date reports a contrary finding. Councils that had received a peer challenge and then had an Ofsted inspection were reported as being more self-aware, confident and that the peer challenge had correctly identified areas for development.

5.3.3 Sharing information

While many interviewees themselves were not concerned about the sharing of information, some reported concern amongst their peers. It was clear that further work needs to be done nationally and locally to clarify how information collected as part of the peer challenge process should or would be used. Interviewees reported concern about whether Ofsted would have access to peer challenge findings resulting in some employing caution when challenge teams offered feedback to host councils.

Across the regions a number of models were at play to address this issue. At one end of the spectrum, regions adopted a structured approach and gave host councils a quality assured written report at the end of the peer challenge. If the information contained within the report was shared outside of the peer challenge process, the region had confidence that they could explain what actions had been put in place following the peer challenge. At the opposing end, other regions decided not to put findings in writing but instead they verbally presented the findings. Sometimes these were supported by a private hand written note or letter to the host DCS. This was to prevent specific information becoming subject to Freedom of Information requests, but also to prevent Ofsted and others accessing the information and holding the council to account. This issue demonstrates an ongoing challenge around trust and the place of the programme alongside the inspection framework.

5.4 Time and funding

Mostly interviewees' references to time and cost related to sustainability of the model. There was acknowledgement that the programme can be time intensive, especially for those in lead roles but this time, it was felt, was well invested. Indeed, many interviewees said they would not be involved in the peer challenge programme if they did not see its value.

Some of the reported challenges and issues of sustainability, however, related to:

- Regions receiving funding for one year at a time. Interviewees explained that this inhibits the programme's progress as regions cannot plan for the longer term and it creates uncertainty about the future of the programme.

- The need for funding for the programme of work to continue. Some interviewees felt that central government should keep funding and supporting the programme in the future, whereas others felt that if councils see value in the model, they should be prepared to fund it themselves.

- A number of interviewees spoke about the challenge of reducing the number of councils in intervention while budgets are decreasing. Some felt that there was conflict between what government is trying to achieve through a self-improving model and the investment it is prepared to make.

Sustainability

Other concerns about the sustainability of the programme specifically related to time and funding; these included the need for the lead-DCSs to 'share the load' in future rounds. In order for the programme to be sustainable, some felt that other DCSs and assistant directors would need to take a leading role for elements of the model in the future. Indeed, a number of regions had already established or were planning to convene a cross-regional group of officers to drive forward the programme in 2013/14.

Some interviewees reported concern about how long 'goodwill' will continue. There was a feeling that the programme is reliant, to some extent, on the commitment of councils to release staff. As reported, while the benefits are perceived to outweigh the costs,

some interviewees talked about the need for this to continue in the future.

As discussed above in Chapter 4, many interviewees considered the role of the programme manager to be crucial in ensuring the programme's momentum. The need for administrative support, which was reported as being no longer available within councils given the many cuts, will be needed to sustain the programme in the future.

5.5 Evidencing change

All regions acknowledged that more needs to be done to support regions to measure change. Interviewees were unanimous in their view that the sector needs to start demonstrating the impact of the programme. While some regions were developing formal evaluations, others were in the process of setting systems in place for the future. Many regions were hosting review and planning meetings during February 2013 to discuss these issues and to start to evidence impact. Unfortunately, due to the timing of our research, this data is not reported here. CIB may like to contact programme managers or lead-DCSs to explore, through short telephone conversations, the outcomes of these meetings. This will enable CIB to record impact at a local level as well as get an overview of regional developments planned for 2013/14.

5.6 Central government priorities

Some interviewees talked about the potential limitations of the sector-led improvement peer challenge due to central government priorities taking precedence over some local issues. Indeed, the focus on adoption was cited by interviewees. While there was commitment to working to improve the outcomes for children on the adoption register, interviewees talked about many other areas of priority as well. Interviewees were keen that the programme stood the test of time. As governments and their priorities change, interviewees expressed concern that these issues do not overshadow other areas needing development.

5.7 CIB, councils and cross-regional working

While it was not raised as a concern as such, several interviewees talked about the need to enhance the relationship between CIB and councils. These comments related to a need for more clarity around the different CIB roles at regional and national levels. A small number of interviewees commented that more could be done centrally to support the engagement of individual councils. Furthermore, interviewees felt that more needed to be done to develop cross-regional working. While programme managers are aware of and share cross-regional practice, a more formalised approach should be considered.

5.8 Regional plans for the future

Many interviewees commented that the peer challenge programme is part of a wider journey of improvement and that it will take time to embed and sustain. Current signs are positive. Indeed, all regions demonstrated that they had responded to councils' needs and had renewed their peer challenge approach. For many, this related to responding to day-to-day issues such as inspections or staff movement resulting in original plans to be adopted. Indeed, the fluidity of the model is one of its successes (see Chapter 3).

As mentioned above, all regions were hosting a review and evaluation meeting during February 2013 to assess impact and plan their future peer challenge programme. While the research team do not have access to this information, it was clear through the interviews that all regions planned to assess what had worked well and where development is needed for 2013/14. All were keen to evolve and respond to national, regional and local needs. These included developing the model so it reflected changes to the inspection framework, especially around multi-agency inspections and incorporate SWAP. As a region, all interviewees talked about developing their self-assessment data to better support the peer challenge programme and wider sector-led improvement developments.

Interviewees from across the nine regions recognised the need to further develop partner agency engagement in the peer challenge in the future. Not only were regions keen to engage partners, in particular health; they also wanted to enhance political and lead member

engagement in the peer challenge visits. The pro-active role of most lead-Lead Members was valued by interviewees; they were seen as having a key role in enhancing member engagement in the future. Lead members explained that they have the necessary credibility and clout to talk to peers in other councils. While the same messages might be given by peer challenge team officers, lead members felt that they needed to be engaged to ensure messages were heard and that peer challenges included political scrutiny. Linkages to lead member networks were already developing and this would continue in the future. Furthermore, regional DCS and Assistant Director groups were also seen as having a key role in the future sustainability of the model.

Specific regional developments for the future, as reported by interviewees, related to:

- updating the peer challenge handbook or guidance, including refreshing the ground rules
- revising how councils are matched and how peer challenge teams are deployed
- amending the topic foci so these are narrower and more focused on key priority areas
- developing sub-regions
- carrying out within-council peer challenges.

6 Key messages for stakeholders

This section offers key messages and recommendations for the different stakeholders involved in the sector-led peer challenge. Some of these messages apply to a number of stakeholders whereas others are specific.

Recommendations for lead-stakeholders

Lead-stakeholders should consider working with CIB and others to support the engagement of councils who are less willing to engage. Furthermore, they could collate and circulate evidence of change resulting from peer challenge activity to support others to understand its value.

Lead members for Children's Services across all councils need to be engaged in peer challenge. As a minimum, they need to be involved in the self-assessment and feedback activity; however, their active involvement in the peer challenge visits should be encouraged and developed as part of the programme moving forward. Lead-lead members have a role to play in proactively engaging colleagues with the peer challenge programme.

While cross-regional working is taking place in some areas, more could be done to share practice at a regional level. Programme managers may like to consider regular meetings (face to face or online) to support the sharing of knowledge, to discuss issues and challenges and evidence of change.

Regions need to consider the value of the role of the programme manager as the programme develops in the future. If funding for the role ends, regional leads and councils will need to plan how they ensure the programme maintains its focus, support and momentum.

There is a need for regions to measure and evaluate change. Currently regional leads are not familiar enough with the learning that has taken place within councils and are unable to confidently cite hard evidence. If the sector is to prove the benefits of the model, evidence needs to be collected in a consistent way from DCSs or Assistant Directors.

Recommendations for challenge teams

Peer challenge team members need the appropriate skills and tact to offer support and challenge. While some regions have trained colleagues working as part of a team, currently, this is not the case in all regions. There may be a role for the team leader (often a DCS) to ensure that appropriately skilled staff make up the team.

DCSs need to have a thorough understanding of their data and self-assessment. Good practice in some regions shows that performance and data teams support strategic leaders with this task. This should be encouraged across all regions and individual councils.

Recommendations for host councils

As for challenge team DCSs, the host council DCS needs to have a thorough understanding of their data and self-assessment. Good practice in some regions shows that performance and data teams support strategic leaders with this task. This should be encouraged across all regions and councils.

Host councils need to ensure they provide an honest and accurate assessment of their strengths and weaknesses through self-assessment and this should be subject to peer challenge and moderation.

Leaders in host councils need to be committed to the peer challenge programme and share this with their staff.

Recommendations for Government and Ofsted

There is a need for Government and Ofsted to consider how sector-led improvement programmes and initiatives sit alongside formal inspection frameworks. Currently some uncertainty remains about what will be done with data collected for a self-assessment or during a peer challenge. For the model to work, councils need confidence and reassurance that the data will not be used out of context to penalise councils.

Furthermore, Ofsted need to consider how they will use the peer challenge model during inspections. Councils report that Ofsted inspectors are not interested in seeing self-assessments or action plans and they feel that this is a missed opportunity in demonstrating to Ofsted where councils see themselves on their improvement journey.

7 Conclusions

Our research shows that there continues to be a strong commitment to the sector-led peer challenge programme at a national and regional level. It is perceived to be a credible model that offers good value for money and is resulting in improved practice. On the whole, councils appear to have embraced the model and most have been involved in a peer challenge during 2012/13. However, within some regions, there are a small number of councils that appear less committed or willing to engage. Most regions have developed a model that is fit for purpose. Each model has been developed in collaboration with DCSs and often lead members in response to their needs. Some regions have a more established approach in place, often building on learning from the early adopter programme activity. Others have more embryonic and developmental structures in place. Despite the different approaches adopted, all regions cited examples of impact as a result of the peer challenge programme. While few hard examples of evidence were cited, reported impacts relate to:

- improving service provision
- mobilising early help to councils most in need
- developing relationships and reinvigorating regional networks and groups to facilitate shared learning
- creating a culture of openness, trust, self-reflection and challenge
- providing a range of professional development opportunities for a number of stakeholders, including councillors and partner agencies
- informally and formally sharing good practice outside of the peer challenge programme.

Our data shows that more needs to be done at a regional and national level to collect evidence of change. Currently, regional impact assessments are patchy with lead stakeholders citing limited examples of change. This is despite most interviewees recognising the need for the programme to prove its value. All areas are committed to recording evidence of change in the near future. Self-assessment activity was perceived to be critical to the success of the programme. Regions shared a strong desire to have access to accurate and timely information so they could better identify and support individual councils on their improvement journey. Interviewees requested support from CIB to enhance access to regional and council level data in the future. While there was recognition that this has been attempted before, it was not fit for purpose.

All regions planned to develop their approach to meet the changing needs of individual councils: CIB (specifically around SWAP) and other national developments (such as the new inspection framework). For some regions, relatively minor changes will be introduced during 2013/14 but others are implementing a more radical overhaul. This includes introducing sub-regions or focusing on a limited number of priority areas.

The peer challenge programme is perceived to be one element of the wider self-improvement agenda. Many regions have closely aligned leadership programmes and succession planning activities with the peer challenge in an attempt to ensure the model has the right people with the right skills. This will also help ensure its sustainability. Many have also aligned peer challenge activity to wider regional learning seminars and events. There is clearly scope for greater cross-regional working and the sharing of good practice. Currently there are limited formal arrangements in place to support regional leads to share learning and practice but this is something we recommend CIB consider facilitating in the future. This need not be a costly development and could be successfully facilitated via existing online forums.

Looking back to the early adopter programme evaluation, it is clear that progress has been made. There is no longer confusion about the role of the sector-led improvement peer change programme alongside other sector-led improvement models. It is seen as one part of a wider agenda. While some of the challenges reported during the earlier adopter programme remain, such as funding, time, capacity and willingness to engage, these appear less prominent.

Reference

Easton, C., Poet, H., Aston, H. and Smith, R. (2012). *Evaluation of the Early Adopter Sector-Led Improvement Programme Pilots* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER. [online] Available: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SLIP01 [25 February 2013].

Appendix A Summary of regional approaches

	East Midlands	East	London	North East	North West	South East	West Midlands	Yorkshire and Humber	South West
Regional or local priorities for peer challenges	Regional priorities reviewed annually. DCSs choose individual topic focus based on recent self-assessment.	Regional priorities were identified by DCSs.	Local priorities	National and local priorities identified. Regional DCS group identified councils with specific strengths to support the peer challenges.	National and local priorities identified led by regional and sub-regional groups.	Local priorities identified by DCSs.	Local priorities identified by DCSs, supported by a DCS moderator.	Local priorities identified and shared across the region.	Regional priorities identified from which councils choose peer challenge.
Sub-regions	No	No	These are likely to develop in the future.	Yes	Yes, known as 'Best Practice Networks (BPN)'.	No	No	Not at the moment but it is being considered.	These are likely to develop in the future.
Council or cross-regional teams	Cross-council teams	Single and cross-council teams	Single council teams	Single council teams, in some cases external to the region.	Cross-council teams	Cross-council teams	Single teams supported by a moderator. Some outside of region peer challenges.	Single and cross-council teams, including some out of region teams.	Single teams but this will change in future.
Strategic leader involvement	Lead members involved in planning, challenges and feedback.	Lead members and Chief Executives involved in regular meetings; planning and feedback.	Lead members aware and involved in planning.	Lead members and Chief Executives involved in planning and feedback.	Lead members and Chief Executives involved in regular meetings; planning and feedback.	Lead members involved in planning, some challenges and feedback.	Lead members involved in planning, some challenges and feedback.	Lead members and Chief Executives involved in planning, in some challenges and feedback.	Lead members and Chief Executives involved in planning and feedback.
Officer involvement	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service, Data/ Performance Officers.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service; Team managers.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service; Team managers.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service; third and some fourth tier officers.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service; third and some fourth tier officers.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service; third and some fourth tier officers and partner agencies.	DCSs; Assistant Directors; Heads of Service; third and some fourth tier officers.

	East Midlands	East	London	North East	North West	South East	West Midlands	Yorkshire and Humber	South West
Partner involvement	Yes – in wider sector-led improvement work. Will develop further links in future.	Some health, police and school engagement but this is an area recognised as needing development.	An area recognised as needing development.	Some partner engagement including LSCB Chair. An area recognised as needing development.	Yes – in wider sector-led improvement work. Will develop further links in future.	Some health engagement but this is an area recognised as needing development.	Council staff only.	Yes – including police and health.	Yes
Peer challenges complete?	Not yet (by end of March 13)	Yes	Not yet (by end of March 13)	Yes	Not yet (by end of March 13)	Not yet (by end of March 13)	Not yet	Yes	Not yet (by end of February 13)
Feedback format	Written quality assured reports	Feedback summary collected but format unknown	Varied between councils	Varied between councils	Written feedback sheet	Presentation and six month follow-up visit	Feedback form	Varied between councils with both formal and less structured models being used.	Presentations
Links to succession planning	Yes – links to formal leadership programme	Yes	Unclear if formal links exist.	Yes – each sub-region has a lead officer and this is linked with peer challenge.	Yes	Unclear if formal links exist.	Limited but this will be an area for focus in the future.	Yes – links to formal leadership programme with plans to develop it further.	Yes
Training and support sessions	Lead members trained in peer challenge. Officers trained through leadership programme.	Yes	Yes	Yes – at sub-regional level	Yes	Yes – sessions run for host and receiving teams	Yes – for chief executives, lead members and DCSs	Yes – linked to succession planning	Yes
Handbook or written guidance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

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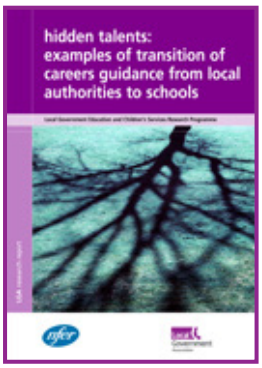

Hidden talents: examples of transition of careers guidance from local authorities to schools

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www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGCG01

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LGA research report

The peer challenge programme is an integral part of the sector-led improvement programme. Since its inception, the peer challenge has evolved under the support and direction of the Children's Improvement Board (CIB). Originally conceived as a centrally run system with a number of 'early adopter' councils, peer challenge has evolved on a regional basis. Our research shows good progress has been made with regions reporting that the model is credible, offers good value for money and is helping to improve practice.

This report captures regional lead stakeholders' views on the impact of the programme. The findings will be of relevance to CIB, the LGA and the sector in developing this area of work.

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