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## Report

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# Review of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme's Peer Challenge Programme

**Final report**

National Foundation for Educational  
Research (NFER)



# Review of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme's Peer Challenge Programme

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## **Executive summary**

A review of the Peer Challenge Programme was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) between October 2014 and January 2015, on behalf of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP). The review aimed to provide a qualitative narrative of the Peer Challenge programme and explored the: reasons for, and benefits of, local authorities' involvement; the programme's effective aspects; the impact, if any, of participation in the Programme; and whether any aspects could be improved.

### **Key motivations for involvement in the Peer Challenge Programme.**

As a host (receiving a peer challenge), local authorities' motivations included the opportunity to: benefit from expert external input into a specific issue requiring improvement; support and develop the general culture and practice of improvement; and provide external validation and affirmation of improvement approaches. As a visitor (a member of the team visiting another local authority to conduct a peer challenge), local authorities' motivations included the opportunity to: facilitate professional development opportunities; and acquire knowledge and experience.

### **Benefits of involvement in the Peer Challenge Programme**

As a host, local authorities benefited from: the chance to be open to, and involved in, independent, but relevant scrutiny; receiving valuable external perspectives from an appropriately skilled and experienced team; the support for reflective practice opportunities; and developing new links with professionals in the same role in other local authorities. As a visitor, local authorities benefited from personal and professional opportunities and experiences.

### **Effective elements of the process of the Peer Challenge Programme**

The effective elements of the process included the: characteristics and composition of participants; availability of perspectives from multiple local authorities; clear communication between DCSs prior to visits; clarity and focus of the parameters of the challenge; investment of time and energy in preparing for and conducting a challenge; and the feedback and post visit-follow up activities.

### **Impact of the Peer Challenge Programme**

The outcomes of the Peer Challenge Programme have been used by local authorities to 1) strengthen the basis for, or corroborate, decisions they planned to take in relation to their improvement journeys and 2) restructure or redesign of elements of the systems or services provided to children and young people.

### **Conclusion and opportunities for further development**

The Peer Challenge Programme is regarded as a highly valuable process which provides unique practical and expert insights that can be tailored to individual local authorities' improvement journeys. Suggestions to develop the Programme in future focus on: changes to practical or administrative aspects of the Programme and options to capture and share the learning from the Programme.



# 1 Introduction

In October 2014, the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to conduct an independent review of the Peer Challenge Programme available to the nineteen local authorities which subscribe to SESLIP.

The purpose of the review is to support Directors of Children's Services (DCS) to understand the value of, and ongoing need for, peer challenge and to contribute to SESLIP's future decisions regarding the services they offer. The review aims to provide a qualitative narrative of the Peer Challenge Programme to capture Directors of Children's Services' (DCSs) views of its effectiveness and impact on children and young people as well as local authority participants.

The review is based on telephone consultations with eleven SESLIP member DCSs. The consultations explored the:

- reasons for, and benefits of, local authorities' involvement in the Peer Challenge Programme
- elements of the process that are perceived to be effective
- impact of local authorities' participation in the Peer Challenge Programme
- whether any aspects could be improved.

## 2 Reasons for involvement in the Peer Challenge Programme

### 2.1 What are the key motivations for involvement in the Peer Challenge Programme?

A range of individual motivations were highlighted by DCSs, from the perspective of participating in the Peer Challenge Programme as a host local authority (receiving a peer challenge) and as a visitor (a member of the team visiting another local authority to conduct a peer challenge).

#### 2.1.1 Motivation to get involved as a host local authority

##### To benefit from expert external input into a specific issue requiring improvement

Peer challenge provided the opportunity to draw in knowledge and expertise from other local authorities (LAs) to support developments in specified areas of service delivery or performance **already identified** as being of concern or requiring improvement. Peer challenge was viewed as a means of consultancy input to add a '*fresh pair of eyes*' dimension and provide a steer for the host to enhance and take their own improvement efforts to the next level.

*Peer challenge is helpful to help unpick something where you've reached the end of your own resources – independent view on an issue which is troubling you.*

*I want the opportunity for external people to come in and have a look – they will give a different view, or have a different perspective.*

*We were looking for something that would give us some feedback around our strengths and secondly help us in terms of ideas around improvement.*

*We have picked areas [in which] we have thought that we needed to make improvements or we thought that there would be challenges around certain things.*

Interviewees were also motivated to engage in the process to help their local authorities **proactively** prepare for changes and developments, as well as to assess progress made to date. For example, to prepare for changes that might be necessary to meet requirements of changing policy contexts and reform agendas.

*I was looking for hints for how to speed up the process of getting ready for SEND reform.*



## **To support and develop the general culture and practice of improvement**

Peer challenge was also used to encourage enhancements in the overall approach to improvement amongst staff, as one DCS explained 'I wanted to create a new culture of self awareness of self assessment'. Crucially, external input was seen as an effective vehicle for encouraging reflective practice.

*We use it as an opportunity to get managers and practitioners to find a way to think about what they are doing in such a way that they can present it to a whole group of people as a package. It's an opportunity for them to reflect, present and hear back from, and have constructive challenge from, their peers.*

## **To provide external validation and affirmation of improvement approaches**

DCSs were motivated to engage in peer challenges because of the value of external validation to help contextualise both the nature of the perceived issue or problem and the response put in place. Hence peer challenge was attractive as a means of assessing the validity of concerns about performance and service delivery issues identified by senior managers and then as a means of evaluating their consequent actions and approaches to improvement put in place.

*We wanted assurance that we weren't totally off the wall with what we're doing.*

*There are two very good reasons for using the peer challenge process (i) to explore what should our strategy be? How can you help us with that? (ii) we've got a strategy in place, now tell us how we're doing.*

*We saw the opportunity of the peer challenge to come in and check, from an external perspective,...where we were at that [point]. The other thing is also to bring in ideas of people who have worked in other authorities in different ways. They reinforced a lot of things that we already knew were the case.*

### **2.1.2 Motivation for involvement as a (visitor) peer challenger**

#### **To facilitate professional development opportunities**

Leading or participating in a peer challenge team was seen as a valuable opportunity for professional development and skill acquisition. It also provided an opportunity to work alongside individuals held in high regard within the sector.

*My goal was to learn how to do a peer review in a way that didn't make people defensive – that wouldn't get the job done, it would just close the system down.*

*I wanted the experience. I knew people who had done it and wanted to try myself.*

*Would be good to work with someone I really like and whose professional practice I really respect – I will learn more from that.*

*In terms of staff joining [peer challenges]...I see that really as part of people's CPD, the feedback is they learn a great amount...it gives people time to reflect on what is happening 'back at the ranch' in terms of understanding where our organisation and services are, giving reflection, comparing and contrasting.*

## **To acquire knowledge and experience**

People were also motivated to engage with the Peer Challenge Programme because of the opportunities to acquire knowledge and information through exposure to different ways of working in other LAs. The process also allows members of the visiting team to see firsthand the consequences of following, or not following, a particular direction or course of action, as well as offering a benchmark against which their own situation could be considered.

*I wanted to be able to take the learning back to the ranch - a double win situation. I learned a lot about things that work well and things that are not working so well – I was able to take back some ideas, and also was very reassured that some of the ways we're doing stuff, which is different, is the right direction of travel.*

*They have all come back with good ideas and one of the things that I have encouraged them to do is, when they are part of a visiting team, going to another authority to bring two or three ideas back and then implement one of them.*

*I think that they are really powerful learning tools both for the people conducting the peer review and of course those authorities who are receiving it as well. So I see the benefit on both sides.*

## **2.2 How does the peer challenge process fit with LAs' self assessment processes and improvement journeys?**

The peer challenge process was generally seen to be compatible with, and complement, (without duplicating), other elements of improvement strategies and approaches underway across the LAs.

### **Compatibility**

The ethos/character of the peer challenge, (in that it was not deficit orientated), was a key element of compatibility, and was closely aligned with the cross sector sharing idea, already embedded in many LA's approaches to improvement. Compatibility also stemmed from the level of ownership and control DCSs had over the process: it was not imposed from outside; the areas chosen for challenge were identified from within the LA itself; it was conducted at a time that was most appropriate; and the challenge was undertaken by practitioners currently working in local authorities. The

ethos of peer challenge was said to be seen as part of the culture of the organisation in its approach to improvement.

*It is about being rigorous in a way that is kind, rather than in a way that is about trying to show one-upmanship – not trying to catch people out.*

*It is compatible because it is controlled consultancy type analysis from people I know and trust. I don't need an additional attack – I'm fighting on too many fronts as it is.*

*I think that it has become embedded within my team. We haven't just picked areas that are struggling, we have picked areas that are strong as well. To think about how we can make them better.*

### **Complementary**

The peer challenge complemented LA's improvement approaches through providing opportunities to learn from, and share ideas and experience – so visiting teams could reflect on their experiences in host LAs and use this when considering issues in their own LA. The completion of a self assessment form was seen to have wider tangible benefits, such as assisting preparation for Ofsted inspections.

*The people who are part of the teams have benefitted hugely because they have been in another local authority, they have found out what others are doing and that has had spin offs, so that the team that goes in has then benefitted and been able to apply that learning in their local authority.*

## 3 The benefits of involvement in the peer challenge process

Interviewees highlighted their perceptions of the value and benefits derived from being involved in the peer challenge process. These generally mapped on to their core motivations for participation.

### 3.1 What did hosts value and gain from being involved in the process?

#### **The chance to be open to, and involved in, independent, but relevant scrutiny**

The peer challenge gave recipients confidence that they were involved in a fair, open and robust challenge process. The fact that the challenge was being undertaken by 'a trusted colleague rather than by Ofsted' provided the opportunity and appropriate forum to 'share as much as you want to share'. The level of ownership and control over the process, including the management of feedback and discretion over how to use the challenge findings, meant that participants felt they had been able to engage in an open and effective process.

*I found far more benefits than any disadvantages and the work that we have been doing as a result of the challenge has really benefited us, it has put a spot light on that area that we felt that we wanted to improve.*

*...for me a big advantage of a peer review or challenge process is that it is your peers and it is not an inspection programme. What is different with a peer challenge is you can be totally honest, so when they came here we were able to say "we don't think that we are doing this bit as well as we think we should, could you look at it a bit more and say to us whether you think that there is something missing".*

#### **Receiving valuable external perspectives from an appropriately skilled and experienced team**

The process had enabled involvement in constructive, mature conversations that were non-threatening and realistic because of the common understandings and experiences of hosts and visitors. Peer challenge teams were seen to have relevant knowledge and expertise in the particular area and recipients benefitted from the 'fresh pair of eyes' approach.

*I just feel that it has added a huge amount of value to what you are doing because the [peer challenges] that we have had have helped us refocus the work that we have been doing and then it has benefited us because we have had information that we have then been able to use as part of our future planning and our future vision.*

*The main comments we have had reinforce a few key messages from the peer review process – we have had some fantastic feedback on what we need to do around [a range of different] services which we really felt was beneficial from our point of view.*

### **The support for reflective practice opportunities**

The structure and focus of peer challenges were seen to have contributed to improvements in the performance of those whose 'day job' it is to challenge themselves as it 'encourages people to be more outward looking, .. learning from elsewhere in terms of opportunities'. Recipients noted that the process had helped them develop their thinking to become more challenging of themselves. The opportunity for staff to undertake a self assessment exercise and to then take the feedback and work it into their wider improvement journey was seen as a key benefit.

*The peer challenge gave us the opportunity to re-frame our narrative and perspectives. We celebrated some [specific service providers] because of their excellent practice, but then we needed someone to come along and get us to think more about why they all don't operate like that.*

*You always see things differently. When you come back you can bring that experience with you directly... The discussions that you have as a team as well, you talk to different people and through those discussions you get into detail around aspects of practice, it is about what we would expect good practice to be.*

### **Developing new links with professionals in the same role in other local authorities**

The opportunity to develop new relationships and links with experts in other local authorities, possibly in similar roles, was considered beneficial by a number of interviewees.

*Connections within the local authorities was another benefit we gained from the peer challenge. Having someone in the know who is going through it is a very good support.*

## **3.2 What did visitors value and gain from being involved in the process?**

### **Personal and professional opportunities and experiences**

Peer challenges provided team leaders and members with significant professional development experiences and a chance to broaden their understanding of the diversity of local authority operating contexts and systems.

*In one peer challenge ... I took with me a colleague from this authority who had never done anything like that before and she definitely learned a lot. In each case, staff have come back with positives in terms of the learning and I think that is a really key professional development opportunity for staff, I think it is really useful for them to have that experience.*

*There is a bland assumption that local authorities are the same and operate the same. When you are doing these peer challenges you realise how different models are being utilised by other LAs.*

The comparative benefit of the peer challenge was described by one DCS who explained 'I would sacrifice conferences and training courses ahead of peer reviews. In terms of people's time, I think that they learn more from a peer review than they do a training course or conference'.

Several noted the value derived from the feeling of liberation and inspiration that came from being 'freed from their diaries' for a couple of days' to conduct the challenge and that 'it is an absolute joy actually, without the distraction of a big local authority, to get your chance to look at one specific area'. Others commented on the instructive and constructive elements of working in or leading a team of reviewers, (possibly not known to each other), to deliver a quality product at the end of the two days. This also had the potential benefit of supporting network development amongst peers.

*I've also found it immensely enjoyable too. It's a good way of getting to know DCS /ADs in other LAs. It's part of enriching your own network. The value of that should not be overlooked.*

Alongside the professional satisfaction in helping another local authority and/or DCS develop their improvement journey, several interviewees highlighted the sense of privilege they felt in being allowed the right of access to another LA's thinking and actions and the opportunity to immediately apply such experience and insights to their own LA/service.

*What you learn from being involved (as lead DCS) just gets absorbed into your thinking.*

*Reflective practice opportunities are very valuable. It is almost default learning – you can't help but to apply what you're looking at back into your own systems and services.*

*A really good piece of immersion training – real time with immediacy attached to it.*

## 4 The effective elements of the Peer Challenge Programme

A range of (generally inter-related) factors were identified as contributing to the effectiveness of a peer challenge falling into two broad areas: the people involved and elements of the process itself.

### 4.1 What were the key elements underpinning the effectiveness of the peer challenge process?

#### Characteristics and composition of participants

Most interviewees stressed the importance of the characteristics, outlooks, experience and motivations of all participants in the peer challenge process. The fact that challenges were undertaken by peers was of central importance because of the shared experience, perspectives and understanding of working in similar contexts and environments. Peers with up-to-date knowledge, and DCSs 'who know what the current operating context is', were regarded key to the effectiveness of the process.

In turn, this supported a dialogue based on professional respect and trust which increased participants' confidence in the value of the outcomes of the process.

*I think you respect the other person and you value what they are about to tell you and what they might find.*

*I think that there is an element of trust, professional respect for each other's services, ...recognises that it is a two way process, ...and I think importantly it is that quality of that relationship you get through sharing quite professional stuff in a lot more detail which you would normally get through a training course or conference.*

It was also suggested that the challenge needs to be led 'by a DCS who honestly wants to help another colleague improve' and that the host DCS must 'honestly want to improve'. Value was added to the process when the lead reviewer brought specific expertise to the challenge and when the lead and team members were drawn from LAs who had recently undergone similar improvement journeys or were 'at the forefront of the reform agenda'.

Hence, securing the involvement of 'the right people' facilitated confidence and trust in the process, leading to greater transparency and openness ensuring the challenge was fit for purpose to support effective improvement in the host LA. As one DCS explained 'you want people with credibility and all of the things that we said, but it needs to be a mix [of people]... to be effective'. Many commented that knowing and trusting the lead reviewer led to a more relaxed review process, but also supported a rigorous and thorough challenge where a host could be comfortable, but not complacent, in the process.

*It was helpful we had someone we knew and trusted. A DCS I've known for years. I felt no anxiety whatsoever – I wasn't complacent, I didn't think he'd give us an easy ride. I knew I had someone coming who I trusted and valued. He brought with him an excellent team – they were very skilled.*

*It works because of the pedigree [of the] challenge team, but not like Ofsted. The process is led by people in the field, asking intelligent questions. You can actually have a mature conversation – it is not like Ofsted where you are having to watch yourself the whole time – you can afford to introduce complexity and reality into the conversation.*

*You are getting in expert practitioners who are doing a job in another authority... they bring that experience and knowledge to the table and that is really important. I think that if you tried to assemble a team of three or four people with that sort of skill... you would find that hard to do. Also because they are doing the jobs they understand the issues that you are facing and the interplay of issues as well e.g. the fact that there might be new legislation that might be impacting on another.*

*I think there is a critical sort of friend type model here, where you have got somebody saying to you 'you could do more with this' or 'this could be better' rather than it being an inspection where you might not want to be so honest.*

Peer challenges worked well when they were effectively led and facilitated, and included pre-visit meetings to discuss what was to be done during the visit, timely review of relevant documents, and 'thoughtful creation of review teams based on personal interest and potential contribution to the challenge process. One team member noted that 'It felt like we were part of the process of deciding how our skills and expertise would be best used. It was collaborative leadership and decision making'.

Effectiveness also stemmed from the inclusion of, and commitment from, relevant partners and stakeholders involved. This entailed ensuring that a comprehensive range of people were consulted/spoken to during the challenge process, including service users as well as managers and practitioners, if appropriate to the challenge. Buy-in and commitment from partners was also seen as an important factor contributing to a successful challenge.

### **Perspectives from multiple local authorities**

A few interviewees highlighted the value of the visiting team being composed of a mix of peers from different local authorities. This was considered a strength as it offered the host team a breadth of insights and experiences from a range of local authorities.

*I think that the fact that there are four people from four different authorities is a real strength to the process as well and also you try to get a mix of seniority within that team and a mix of experiences in that team.*



*You've got multiple local authorities' perspectives in that two days...and it gives you a really good insight into what is going on in other places and whether that is transferable.*

## **Communication**

Pre-visit dialogue and communication between host and visiting DCS were critical in clarifying the purpose and intent of the challenge, the specifics of the area to be explored, and the intended outcomes of the challenge. One interviewee commented that 'the initial conversation with the DCS led me to exactly what it was they wanted me to look at. What do you want me to leave you with?' In this respect, it was also noted that the effectiveness and robustness of these conversations were more to do with the character and values of the DCS involved than the actual process of the challenge itself.

## **Clarity and focus**

The most effective peer challenges were those with a highly focussed level of enquiry, set out as clearly defined goals and intended outcomes from the visit. Pre-agreed decisions about the scope of the challenge and who would be involved were seen as key element of success. In this way, there was a general agreement that the challenge had to centre on a small number of tightly defined research questions which would be subject to high level, intense scrutiny throughout the visit so that 'you can really get under the skin of what you're looking at in two days'.

*It felt very privileged to be focussed on in that much detail – it's not often you get that intensity.*

*The biggest thing is to bring the question down to such a small scale, that you could say, well is it worth it? But a really narrow focus will help take people into different areas and really make them scrutinise what they're doing.*

*The challenge team was given clear direction about what the scope and purpose of the challenge was to be. We [host LA] knew that we were doing ok, but we knew that we had some stuck issues. The challenge was needed to help get beyond the sticking point to support continued attempts to improve the service.*

*I think the fact that, prior to the challenge taking place, the two DCSs will talk to each other in an open way around what the challenges are and through that, you then develop the area of focus.*

As a result of this clarity the learning process for all involved was improved as 'there is a joint learning and I struggle to see how you would get that without the nature of intensity of a peer challenge process'.

## **Investment of time and energy**

A successful challenge also depended on effective preparation – from the hosts and visitors. One interviewee commented that as a peer challenge can be seen as less urgent than an inspection it can fall by the wayside. However, it was deemed 'worth investing as much time in it as possible – if not, the peer challenge will not be flawed, but just won't be quite as strong'. In this context, providing the right amount of

appropriate information to the team prior to the visit was of central importance, as was the completion of a high quality self assessment. Both of these were seen as helping to take the challenge process to the next level.

*If the challenge team have to spend a lot of time learning stuff you already know, they won't have added very much value. The key is to tell them what you think you already know about your service, then the platform from which they start is different. They can then expose you to the things you didn't know or realise.*

*Having to write a self assessment was worth the effort as it helped me get to grips with the service and what needed to be done, so it was ready to meet its targets by the deadline.*

*Places that use their self assessment really wisely get more out of the peer challenge – the self reflection piece is really useful.*

*It works best when the people being challenged take a long hard look at themselves first, and then present that long hard look for challenge – not someone coming in cold.*

*...when we have hosted [peer challenges] we have spent quite a bit of time and energy on what we want the time to look at....my view is that you have to help [the visiting team] by focusing on any areas that you want them to look at.*

*We have also done a self evaluation so that the host team have been given a self evaluation as well as the scoping document and I think with anything like this you get out as much as you put in, so by making sure that we are well prepared then I think that works.*

*That process of pulling everything together...had just revealed that we really haven't got that one key document that pulls it all together – so the mechanism has already started to show us something.*

## **Feedback and post visit-follow up activities**

Feedback was presented in a variety of ways, and it was seen to be most effective when it was concise – either verbal or written (or via a PowerPoint presentation) with the headline finding mapping directly onto the key points of enquiry agreed prior to the visit. This was regarded as a good way of holding the process to account and makes sure it is useful to the host authority.

*At the end of the challenge the people who were leading it did a presentation and that had some areas that they said you might like to do some work in this area, you might like to think about this and that has made us reflect and every challenge that we have had we have had an action plan as a result of it.*

The principle of agreeing the format of feedback with the host DCS prior to the visit gave them a choice of how to discuss the findings as well as control of how the findings would be disseminated and acted upon.

Follow up visits were also seen as a useful part of the process, but not always applied, depending on the purpose of the challenge. Interviewees generally agreed, that if appropriate, these visits could help the host maintain engagement with the element of improvement addressed via the challenge, but there was a view that such visits should not be used to hold the host to account to check if the findings had been acted upon. It was felt that this could jeopardise the voluntary, reciprocal and open-spirit of the peer challenge process. Suggesting that these visits were ‘a more wobbly bit of the process’ one interviewee commented:

*I do not want to be held to account by another DCS for what I have or haven't done in the six months since they led a peer challenge in my LA. That feels all wrong. We'll pack these things away in our memory bank and draw on them in different ways in different times to tackle all the issues we encounter - that's a value of this more flexible arrangement and we should make the most of it.*

## **4.2 What were the key challenges associated with the peer challenge process?**

No significant difficulties appear to have been encountered that compromised the effectiveness and value of the peer challenge process. Those that were highlighted were generally the counter point of the effective factors previously identified and fell into the following main categories.

### **Timescales and capacity**

Several interviewees suggested that the two days allocated to the process may not be sufficient to fully understand, in detail, what was happening in the host LA. In addition, it can present challenges ‘if you want people out and about to view things’. However, interviewees also stated that they would not be in a position to offer any more time to the process, either as hosts or visitors.

*There's not a lot you can manage in two days. You could do with more time, but there again, I don't want to commit too much time (like Ofsted).* One DCS noted that although there have been instances where changes in people's availability, such that ‘sometimes people haven't been able to be part of the team at the last minute’, this has usually been for understandable reasons.

### **Scope of the challenge**

DCSs who had hosted and led peer challenges noted the difficulties surrounding trying to get too much out of the process – one host commented:

*there was too much on the agenda – but we probably put too much in because I wanted them to look at everything and give us their view on everything so that we could take it forward.*

Similarly, a DCS who led a challenge noted:

*It's difficult when the research question is not defined – when the area of investigation is too broad and vague. It will not add value to the host and could be a waste of time.*

The volume, and relevance, of information provided by host LAs also needs to be carefully considered. Several interviewees commented that they had been given too much information by their hosts prior to the visit and it took too long to read through it.

## **Relationships**

Although not personally experienced, a view was raised that difficulties could arise in terms of the composition and dynamics of the review team, so it was suggested that efforts to ensure that the peer challenge team know each other and are compatible could be beneficial. In addition, potential tensions in the relationship between host and visiting DCS were highlighted as needing careful consideration to ensure the process was meaningful:

*I don't want somebody who is in my pocket. [I want] somebody who is going to give me a confident and robust analysis - someone with integrity.*

## 5 What evidence is there to suggest that involvement in the Peer Challenge Programme makes a difference?

The difference the Peer Challenge Programme has made is most commonly evidenced by examples of how the process has directly contributed to, or been a catalyst for, planned changes in strategy or service delivery.

The direct impacts of professional leadership and development programmes on outcomes for children and young people are very difficult to identify and evidence. An evaluation of the Local Government Association (LGA) Safeguarding Peer Review Programme (Martin *et. al*, 2014) underlines this difficulty noting that ‘*in all cases, interviewees struggled to isolate the specific impact of the programme*<sup>1</sup>’. However, as shown in the views of DCSs presented below, the impact associated with the Peer Challenge Programme is seen as an important part of their improvement journeys.

### **Informed strategic changes**

Several local authorities have used the additional evidence, and perspectives, provided by the peer challenge to strengthen the basis for, or corroborate, decisions they planned to take in relation to their improvement journeys. This has led to revised strategies for working with specific groups of children and young people and new arrangements for partnership working.

*The recommendations that come out of that [peer challenge] absolutely informs the development of our [specific service area] strategy. So it has changed how we do things in terms of [that area of service]. It is not just the challenge, it is difficult to say x leads to y but it is definitely part of the intelligence, the data [that] led to a change in how we developed our [specific service area] arrangements.*

*What [the peer challenge] gave us was...the confidence that we had the basis right, the strategy was good and then it gave us the confidence to say “well this is very good but what is missing?”. The peer challenge wasn’t the tipping point or watershed moment but it was something that people stood on to get to the next step.*

*So we used the peer challenge to give an external view about our partnership arrangements...after that we established a new [arrangement] – that became our platform to develop the new partnership architecture and that was directly after that peer challenge.*

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<sup>1</sup> P.17, *Longer-Term Impact of Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews*. Slough: NFER. (2014)

*Peer challenge helped us to unpick what was happening and made us realise that localised services doesn't have to mean each [local delivery site] has its own budget and commission its own additional services so consideration has been given to block commissioning [in a number of ways] to get the same deal between [local delivery sites] with economies of scale, which is underway. This has led to a real money saving.*

*[Our] Service had undergone changes and been really successful in engaging partners in the new way of working. Since then, I have had [service] restructures and what I learned from being involved as a visitor in peer challenge, absolutely fed into my thinking when making changes in my own services.*

### **Tangible difference to service design and delivery**

The impact of the peer challenge in a few local authorities has manifested itself in the restructure or redesign of elements of the systems or services provided to children and young people. Interviewees highlighted how either the feedback from the peer challenge process or the learning gathered from being part of a visiting team had been used to make a tangible difference to the design and delivery of children and young people's services.

*We were thinking about doing a family CAF ... the member of the team that was in that [peer challenge], came back and said it was really good and that just gave us the final push to implement it. I think that the impact has been on how the services have been better developed to support them rather than necessarily impacting directly on them.*

*Feedback [from the peer challenge]...gave a clear message that there was [an issue with the organisation of specific services], that is an area we are pursuing now... in terms of taking our next steps around how we structure our services for [a specific group of children and young people].*

# 6 Opportunities for further development and conclusions

## 6.1 Opportunities for further development

When asked to consider the potential for developing the Peer Challenge Programme, a few DCSs identified opportunities to enhance the process by:

- making changes to the practical or administrative aspects of the Programme
- considering options to capture and share the learning from the Programme.

### Changes to practical or administrative aspects of the Programme

A small number of DCSs suggested it may be useful to consider offering **some additional guidance, or possibly training**, to those who are new to the Peer Challenge Programme.

*When we first started it we did put on sessions (which I think the LGA ran for us)... about hosting a peer challenge or carrying out a peer challenge and we did half day workshops and a load of people went through those and we haven't done those for a while so maybe we need to think about developing the next group.*

*(Although) I think that you can overdo these things sometimes, I'm not sure if the guidance has a lot of detail of what you should be asking for beforehand [as a DCS]. If I had to become a DCS ...I suspect I would have found it more difficult to do because I am not sure that I would have had enough preparation.*

The possibility of widening participation in the peer challenge to involve local authorities' partners was also suggested. Possible options included:

- providing partners with feedback on the outcome of the process as it 'would have been nice/better to have included more partners in the feedback'
- involving partners in a visiting team conducting a challenge in another local authority area to which they could contribute their specific (and complementary) expertise and knowledge.

### Options to capture and share the learning from the Programme

The possibility of establishing an archive or virtual library of self assessments (or other outputs of the peer challenge process that local authorities considered useful) was raised. The purpose of such an archive or library would be to act as a 'collective memory' of peer challenges and to offer practical examples to shape other local authorities' thought processes rather than them 'starting from a blank sheet'. It was suggested that placing any such documents in the archive/library **should only be on a voluntary basis**, with no expectation that local authorities should share all (or any)

of the outputs of their peer challenge. This was considered important to protect the detailed and open dialogue which is a hallmark of the challenge process.

The potential to share learning from the Peer Challenge Programme more widely with local authorities in regions outside the South East was also raised.

*I don't know if they are happening in other parts [of England] as well. I wonder if there is any more cross regional stuff that we should be sharing stuff and talking to each other on how we do things. It could be like a seminar where we all come together and do a bit of sharing.*

## 6.2 Conclusions

The Peer Challenge Programme, managed by the SESLIP, is regarded as a highly valuable process which provides unique practical and expert insights that can be tailored to individual local authorities' improvement journeys. Local authorities' involvement in the Programme is driven by: the external perspectives and validation that it offers on specific changes or more general approaches to improvement; the professional development it offers individuals; and the credible, in-depth learning opportunity it provides for local authorities to increase their knowledge and experience through a constructive dialogue with peers.

As the hosts of a peer challenge, local authorities benefit from their involvement in an independent scrutiny process which provides expert insights on aspects of children and young people's services that they have chosen. Simultaneously, participation in a visiting team provides individuals with unique professional development opportunities, the space and time to critically reflect on their practice and to build networks of contacts with similar professionals in other local authorities.

The Programme's effectiveness relies on the breadth of participants' skills and expertise, from multiple local authorities; the pre-visit communications to specify parameters that are clear and focused; and local authorities' commitment to invest sufficient time in preparing for, as well as engaging in, the two-day challenge visit itself. Agreement on the most appropriate format for feedback from the challenge visit is critical to its effectiveness. Feedback that is concise, if written, and related to the key lines of enquiry for the visit is regarded as the most effective format.

The Peer Challenge Programme has had an impact on the shape of children and young people's services in many local authorities, albeit as one of a number of contributory factors influencing the decision to implement such changes. Several local authorities reported changes to elements of their service delivery or design; or wider, more strategic improvements subsequent to their involvement in the Programme. Elements of the suggestions for enhancing the Programme are already reflected in ongoing actions to develop the Programme. For example, at the time of conducting the fieldwork, guidance<sup>2</sup> was developed to support new participants in the Peer Challenge process and made available in the latest Peer Challenge Round.

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<sup>2</sup> Orientation and Preparation slide set, <http://seslip.co.uk/download-file/160>



## 7 References

Martin, K., Buchanan, E. and Jeffes J. (2014). *Longer-Term Impact of Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews*. Slough: NFER.

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