

The future of children's services improvement

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

This report begins the consultation on the creation of a task and finish Group on the future of children's services improvement, following the direction of the board on 29th September.

Members are asked to consider their responses to the following questions, in order to help guide the remit of the group:

1. Do we recognise the content of the National Audit Office 'Children in need of help or protection' report and agree with Ofsted that 75% of councils are less than *good*?
2. What are the key problems and pressures facing all children's services departments?
3. Is there a shared understanding of what drives improvement and where expertise lies?
4. Are the seven enablers identified in the Isos research accurate and if not, which others have been missed?
5. Are there gaps in the existing children's sector-led support offer and if so, what should be done to fill them?
6. Should the LGA lobby for the DfE to consult with the sector on how funding is spent to support children's services improvement beyond those councils judged to be *inadequate*?
7. What support should be made available to those councils judged to be *inadequate* and what are realistic expectations for their improvement?

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. Note the current context in which children's services are delivered.
2. Consider and respond to the questions posed in the report.

Action

Officers to use member's comments to inform the work of the task and finish group.

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Introduction

1. Evidence indicates that, over the past five years in England, overall demand for children's social care services has increased significantly (for example there has been a 60% rise in child protection plans since 2008, which equates to about 20,000 additional plans) while English local authorities' spending power has decreased.
2. The nature and understanding of children's needs has also change, with greater concerns, for example, about radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. In addition, children's social care services are implementing a range of reforms following recent changes to the legislative framework, such as those relating to special education needs and disability and adoption. These are taking place at the same time as the implementation of reforms to social work practice led by the Chief Social Worker for children and families, and forthcoming changes to multi-agency safeguarding arrangements following the Wood Review of LSCBs
3. Since Ofsted introduced the Single Inspection Framework in 2013 the number of councils judged to be *good* or better has dropped to 25%, compared to 78% in 2008. Ofsted were clear that with the introduction of the SIF they were raising the bar and that only *good* was good enough, but there appears to be no clear narrative on the extent to which these inspection results actually reflect a decline in performance.
4. What is clear is that receiving an *inadequate* judgement from Ofsted often leads to a further downturn in performance. One of Ofsted's central roles is to "help providers that are not yet of a good standard to improve", but analysis undertaken by iMPOWER consulting for the LGA¹ shows that the regulator is falling significantly short of achieving its stated purpose and is, inadvertently, creating an environment in which it is becoming increasingly difficult for authorities to make the necessary improvements to deliver better services.
5. The research shows that an *inadequate* rating appears to be a catalyst for driving even poorer performance and in effect creates a barrier to the improvement required. For many, the rating '*requires improvement*' is also considered to be an obstruction which prevents further improvement, rather than being a catalyst for delivering change. Given that three quarters of councils that have been inspected so far are either *requires improvement* (50%) or *inadequate* (25%), this is a significant concern for the sector.

¹ <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/11431/impower+LGA+report+v5+%282%29.pdf/029591f4-3ea6-4feb-9cfb-b0a6c72fc2f0>

The children's services context

6. The Department for Education (DfE) published its 'Vision for change' in January 2016, setting out a programme of children's social care reform, which will be structured around the following areas:
 - 6.1. People and leadership
 - 6.2. Practise and systems
 - 6.3. Governance and accountability
7. The 'Vision' sets out the DfE's ambition to see a more diverse range of children's social care organisations (including the creation of Trusts and Commissioning models that remove social care from direct council control) in a third of local authority areas by 2020.
8. The LGA is concerned that a focus on structures alone risks missing the innovative work that councils are already undertaking and, further to this, there are other, more effective, ways of driving improvement in children's services.
9. The National Audit Office's 'Children in need of help or protection' report, published in October, highlighted that the DfE's social care reform programme had yet to result in good outcomes and questioned the Department's capacity and capability to implement the reforms set out in the 'Vision' by 2020.
10. The LGA has developed a strong sector-led improvement offer for children's services that includes a variety of peer reviews and diagnostics, leadership courses for children's lead members, individual mentoring support and a suite of 'must know' guides. These products and services are complimented by a variety of sector-led improvement work that is undertaken at a regional level by ADCS, but there is insufficient capacity and funding to ensure all support needs are met.
11. To gain a better understanding of what works in driving improvement in children's services, the LGA commissioned the Isos Partnership to undertake action research which attempted to answer two central questions:
 - 11.1. What are the key enablers of (and barriers to) improvement in local children's services?
 - 11.2. How can the system as a whole facilitate and support improvement in local children's services?
12. The research identified seven universal enablers which the LGA believes are key to driving improvement in children's services (attached as **Appendix A**).
13. The Isos action research also highlighted the fact that genuinely sustained improvement was a long-term endeavour. The report noted a number of factors that can determine how quickly a local area can progress along the improvement journey. These include:
 - 13.1. The depth and duration of service failure – long-term underperformance by children's services can have a compounding effect on the needs of children and families who need support.

- 13.2. The level of frank recognition and acceptance by leaders of the nature of failure – rather than investing time in disputing whether this is the case.
- 13.3. The effectiveness of the initial response – specifically avoiding false starts on ill-thought-out restructures or innovations, leading to staff turbulence.

Questions for discussion

14. The Children and Young People Board is keen to engage with member councils to get a clear picture what works best in driving improvement in children's services and use this evidence to inform the work of the task and finish group.

Financial implications

15. There are no specific additional financial implications for the LGA arising from this report.