

23 March 2017

## **Promoting sector-led improvement in children's services**

### **Purpose of report**

For discussion and noting.

### **Summary**

Since the Department for Education (DfE) funded Children's Improvement Board was closed in 2013, the capacity of the LGA and sector partners to deliver a comprehensive programme of council-led children's improvement support has been reduced.

The DfE has sought to drive improvement centrally through both the Partners in Practice and Innovation Programmes, but the National Audit Office (NAO) report on children in need of help or protection highlighted the Department's failure to act before councils were judged to be *inadequate* by Ofsted.

Discussions have been held with DfE officials on a proposed programme of council-led support that seeks to utilise the expertise of the sector to improve children's services 'upstream' of an *inadequate* Ofsted judgement. This report outlines the possible elements of such a programme and the Board's comments are invited.

### **Recommendation**

The Children and Young People Board is asked to;

1. Discuss and comment on the proposed content of a sector-led improvement offer for children's services.
2. Consider additional opportunities to lobby on the value of a sector-led approach for improvement.

### **Action**

Officers to take action arising out any discussion, as directed by members.

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## **Promoting sector-led improvement in children's services**

### **National Audit Office report on Children in need of help or protection**

1. The National Audit Office (NAO) report, published in October 2016 found that “the actions taken by the Department for Education (DfE) since 2010 to improve the quality of help and protection services delivered by local authorities for children have not yet resulted in services being of good enough quality.”
2. It commented “The Department’s interventions to improve failed local services for children are neither risk-based nor early enough. The Department only intervenes when Ofsted has already found services to have failed local children. It does not plan to use performance information to anticipate risks of failure. Neither the Department nor the 23 per cent of authorities rated *good* yet have the capacity and capability to intervene effectively on a wider scale.”

### **DfE support for improvement in children's services**

3. The Department for Education has committed more than £300 million for improvement and innovation in children's services since 2013. This funding, which runs until 2020, has been allocated for the Innovation Programme, Partners in Practice, City Deals and Trusts.
4. There are currently 34 councils in some form of DfE intervention and we know that the current model of support used by the Department costs a significant amount of money. In some cases, DfE support to individual councils can run into millions of pounds, with comparable investment by the councils concerned.
5. To date, DfE investment has principally been in councils judged to have failed and in mainly *good* councils that can act as innovators and beacons of good practice. We believe that to achieve the NAO aim of seeing more *good* or better children's services by 2020, a more comprehensive improvement offer needs to be made available to the sector which also provides support to councils not yet inspected under the Single Inspection Framework (SIF) and those found to *require improvement*.

### **Increasing the number of Good or better councils**

6. There are 38 councils still awaiting an Ofsted SIF inspection and if current trends continue, we can expect to see at least another 10 of these councils judged to be *inadequate* by March 2018, when the current inspection programme ends. A key aim should be to provide support that will reduce the number of these councils being judged 'less than good' in the coming months.
7. Of the 82 councils rated as less than *good* by Ofsted, the majority, 56, *require improvement* to be good. There is no specific improvement offer to this group and encouraging strong improvement in these councils over the next 3 years is likely to be the best strategy for increasing the number of *good* or better councils in the medium term – by 2020.

8. There are 26 councils judged to be *inadequate*. One concern is that some councils are struggling to 'escape' from this category. Research undertaken for the LGA by iMPower Consulting in 2015 showed that *inadequate* councils face a more severe decline in key performance indicators following inspection than councils judged to be *requires improvement* or better.

### **Our offer to the DfE for sector-led children's services improvement**

9. Our offer to the DfE would be to deploy our tried and tested SLI tools to:

#### 9.1 Build strong and effective performance and cost data and sector-wide intelligence

- 9.1.1 Support each region to develop effective cost and performance benchmarking networks, using common core data sets to ensure every council is well informed of their own strengths/ weaknesses. Providing real-time in-year data.
- 9.1.2 Publish nationally on LG Inform a full suite of key metrics for all councils.
- 9.1.3 Utilise our Principal Advisers and appoint Children's Improvement Advisers, with current expertise of working in the children's sector, to work across the country, linking to Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) regional networks to provide 'soft-intelligence' and identify potential risk factors likely to affect children's services.

#### 9.2 Self-diagnostic tools

- 9.2.1 Develop risk-assessment that allow councils to be more self-aware of their current performance and areas where practice falls below what is good.
- 9.2.2 Offer each council case auditing and other practical tools to test and assess their front-line practice and inspection readiness.
- 9.2.3 Work with regional ADCS to implement rigorous peer-to-peer challenge mechanism to drive improvement in practice.

#### 9.3 Upstream work to improve practice and reduce risk of costly inspection outcomes

- 9.3.1 Undertake a children's peer review for every council once every four years with the purpose of driving improvement in services across all councils at all levels. This would provide high level assurance for DfE of the sector as a whole, and a rich source of transferable learning for the sector.
- 9.3.2 Offer a range of specialist diagnostic reviews: SEND, care practice, London Safeguard Children's Board (LSCB) etc.

- 9.3.3 Design a bespoke version of our financial diagnostic tools for children's services to help councils be cost efficient in their practice and deliver services that are financially sustainable and more resilient.
- 9.3.4 Make best use of the knowledge and expertise in the sector by deploying our extensive list of trained peers (at no cost or marginal fee) to support councils to improve practice ahead of inspection, including case auditing, observing social care practice, supporting and developing front line supervisors and managers, coaching and mentoring.
- 9.3.5 Deploy Children's Improvement Advisers to design and deliver bespoke packages of support to those services seen as being in greatest need.
- 9.3.6 Commission national research, such as the recent ISOS study to identify and share good practice to accelerate improvement in service performance and outcomes.
- 9.3.7 Deliver a full range of regional and national learning events to disseminate good practice.
- 9.4 Work intensively with councils identified as being at risk and those with poor Ofsted judgements
  - 9.4.1 Regional Principal Advisers are expert in brokering and commissioning a wide range of support from specialist technical expertise through to peer mentoring for councils more generally seen as vulnerable or at risk for DCLG and working alongside our in-house Children's Improvement Advisers these skills are fully transferable to children's settings.
  - 9.4.2 Work with and through the DfE advisers, externally appointed commissioners to accelerate improvement in those judged RI (and potentially inadequate.)
- 9.5 Build the leadership and capacity of the sector
  - 9.5.1 Ensure all councils have access to the LGA's nationally recognised leadership development programmes for political leaders.
  - 9.5.2 Use our extensive pool of 400+ trained officer and member peers with specialist knowledge of children's services and currently working in the sector, to deliver a broad range of coaching, mentoring and buddying support for lead members.
  - 9.5.3 Develop and support councillors involved in children's scrutiny arrangement, LSCB boards etc.
  - 9.5.4 Develop the role of Children's Improvement Board (CIB) to provide wider governance of children's improvement by political leaders at a national and local level and to engage key strategic partners – DfE, LGA, ADCS, Solace.

**Implications for Wales**

10. As Children's Services are devolved there are no implications for Wales arising.

**Financial Implications**

11. None.

**Next Steps**

12. The Children and Young People Board is asked to;

12.1. Discuss and comment on the proposed content of a sector-led improvement offer for children's services.

12.2. Consider additional opportunities to lobby on the value of a sector-led approach for improvement.