

Children's Improvement Board update

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

This report updates the Children and Young People's Board on recent developments on the activities led by the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) and invites feedback.

Recommendations

That the Board consider and comment on the current and planned activities of the CIB.

Action

Officers from the CIB team and the LGA to take forward the CIB's work programme in the light of the Board's comments

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Children's Improvement Board update

Background

1. The Children's Improvement Board (CIB) work programme is a major part of local government's push for greater self improvement and self regulation. It is delivered through a partnership between the LGA, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives), supported by the Department for Education (DfE).
2. Because of the significance of the programme to children's services and to local government, an update on CIB is a standing item on Children and Young People Board agendas. The last report was made to the Children and Young People Board at its meeting on 20 October and a further report was presented to the LGA Executive on 8 December 2011.
3. The first year of operation for the CIB has necessarily involved attention to setting up and support arrangements. However, the programme is now moving into a phase of substantial delivery, much of it through regional working, to lead into the first full year of operations in 2012-13. This report gives highlights of current and planned activity.

Key areas of activity

Engaging all councils in a sustainable system and peer challenge

4. At the heart of the work of the CIB is a commitment to engage all councils in self improvement in a way that will be sustainable. Building on their normal processes of self-assessment and review, councils are asked to open this up to external challenge by their peers and, in turn to offer senior officer time to peer challenge others. It is important both that self improvement does not depend on continued national funding and that it creates a culture where councils are more willing to share difficulties with their peers and be ready to ask for help when needed.
5. For this reason, a significant part of this year's and forward work programmes will be work led by councils in regions. In this financial year a total of £1.3 million is being devolved to councils working together in regions. Top priorities for this work are establishing a coordinated approach to peer challenge which engages all councils, and being able both to identify early warning signs of failure and facilitate appropriate support. Following discussions with CIB, all nine regions now have plans in place for local programmes of peer challenge,

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including in some cases training for peer challengers. In some regions challenges are underway and all regions have been asked to aim for 50 per cent of councils to be actively engaged by the end of March in terms of either receiving or offering a challenge. In addition, by the end of March, 26 councils will have used the national programme of specialist children's safeguarding peer reviews. These reviews have been developed and delivered by LGA (formerly LGID) and are now funded and being further developed by CIB.

6. There are a number of councils that are subject to improvement notices from DfE who are receiving support which has been facilitated and part funded by CIB in order to strengthen the delivery of their improvement plans. This has been a priority for CIB but regions are now being asked to develop their local capacity to identify risk earlier, based partly on the outcomes of peer challenge, so that increasingly signs of a decline in performance will be tackled by councils working to support each other.

Political leadership

7. A key part of self improvement is leadership from councillors particularly lead members for children but also council leaders and backbench councillors. This is important both to ensure the quality of the programme and its credibility. The strength of political leadership and the engagement of councillors in improvement activity are both seen as critical by ministers.
8. Particularly critical to this, is mentoring provided by councillors for councillors. At present there are not sufficient member peers in the "bank" to meet actual and potential need for this hands on support, and too much burden is being placed on a small number of councillors. A process is now underway with the LGA's political group offices to recruit more member peers, accredited on the basis of their experience, who will be ready to help where councils and councillors need it. The CIB team also now has additional capacity to support this recruitment process and to support rapid matching of member peers to areas of need.
9. The peer challenge model for children's services being developed in regions, as described above, will be more light touch and it is expected that all councils will get involved. At present most of this activity has been officer led, but councillor involvement is encouraged. Councillors involved in this less formal and lighter touch peer challenge would not need to be accredited nationally or to be drawn from the national bank of member peers; however if a council was felt to be in particular need of support, mentoring might be arranged following the peer challenge.
10. In addition the following activities are planned to support lead members for children:

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- 10.1. continuing support to regional networks of lead members and input from the CIB team to provide updates and seek input to the CIB's work (linked to the LGA's ongoing commitment to provide input and dialogue on policy issues – see the separate Regional Network Update);
- 10.2. an induction event for new lead members in July. It is likely that Children and Young People Board members will be asked to be involved in leading parts of the agenda;
- 10.3. potential funding of free places at the Leadership Academy for lead members for children. This funded approach was trialled in the area of "Aging Well" where 100 places were taken up, indicating the level of demand for this sort of development opportunity. The leadership academy can support members who take on their portfolio mid-year and therefore miss out on induction.

Implementing policy on the ground

11. As part of the CIB's work programme it supports councils in the delivery of major policy change. Councils have already being supported on children's centre services and twenty seven councils are trialling payment by results. Four councils have been funded to develop and share innovative approaches to youth services (Hammersmith and Fulham, Devon leading a consortium of 16 councils, Knowsley and Haringey) and more funding will be available to a larger number of councils for youth service innovation next financial year. A programme on commissioning and productivity in children's services is being led by the LGA's productivity team on behalf of CIB.
12. For the remainder of this year, and continuing into next, dependent on funding, the CIB has agreed that policy priorities should be:
 - 12.1. key aspects of the Munro Review of Child Protection - developing performance data and wider performance information (linked to development of local authority data profiles and knowledge hub); supporting effective social work practice and ensuring that the sector learns from serious case reviews and the evidence base of what works;
 - 12.2. early Intervention – developing a local 'Early Help' offer; the availability of early support for individual children is likely to form part of the new Ofsted inspection methodology;
 - 12.3. youth Services Improvement (as above);
 - 12.4. commissioning and Productivity in children's services including a specific focus on developing new and innovative services for young people;

12.5. improving Adoption and Support for Children in Care.

13. A discussion and scoping event is being held with local authorities on 9 February to shape the CIB's work in commissioning sector support for policy implementation in relation to the Munro Review of Child Protection and early intervention and prevention with vulnerable children and families. Plans for sector-led support in regions show that these are local policy implementation priorities. This scoping event will ensure that CIB develops the right balance between support for regional and local work and support that can and should be offered nationally.

Financial Implications

14. Funding for the programme is provided by DfE. The programme is being hosted by the LGA which claims part of this funding as payment for services provided by the organisation. In addition to this, the LGA provides staff time to contribute to the CIB's work, in support of the LGA's business plan priority to deliver an effective approach to sector-based support in children's services.