

Children's Improvement Board Update on Activity – March 2012

Purpose of report

For information and comment.

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. Colin Hilton who is the new Director for Children's Services Self-Improvement will attend the meeting to discuss priorities for CIB for the year ahead.

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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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 the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), supported by funding from the Department for Education (DfE).
2. Because of the significance of the programme to children's services and to local government, an update on the 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 25 January. This report provides an overview of activity at the end of the CIB's first year.
3. Colin Hilton has recently been appointed as the new Director for Children's Services Self-Improvement. He will attend the meeting to give his sense of progress so far and priorities for the year ahead.

Funding for 2012-13

4. In a strong endorsement of a sector-led approach to improvement, the DfE has granted the CIB a further £9 million for 2012-13. This funding will enable the CIB to maintain and expand its activities, including making an increased sum of around £4 million available to councils through the regions. The confirmation of funding will enable children's services self-improvement to build on the arrangements put in place this year and move into a phase where self-improvement can become an integral part of councils' work on children's services.

Highlights of recent activity

Peer challenge and "early support" for councils

5. All regions have been asked to prioritise peer challenge and "early support" for councils through the funding they receive from the CIB.

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6. Peer challenges are underway in all regions and around 50 per cent of councils will be engaged in some way by the end of March. Regions are developing a number of different approaches to peer challenge. These include pairing individual councils to challenge each other, forming challenge clusters and using a panel of directors of children's services to provide challenge. Peer challenge is wholly owned and led by local councils and is a key part of building an approach to self-improvement which is sustainable in the long term. The CIB will be working with councils to learn from the diversity of approaches and understand which aspects are most significant in helping councils improve the lives of children and young people.
7. Through the regions, councils are being asked to develop their understanding of performance issues in their region, to be more confident that they can identify potential risks and to have a mechanism for facilitating "early support" where this is needed. It is vital that councils themselves get better at understanding what factors might lead a council to get into difficulty and to offer support at an early stage so that formal intervention is reduced. In each region, councils are developing their own approaches to supporting councils and, for the future, it will be crucial that councils can feel more able to acknowledge difficulties to their colleagues and ask for help.

Responding to policy challenges

8. In addition to general support for sector self-improvement, the CIB has a role in helping councils deal with the impact of major policy initiatives. During 2012, it is likely that some councils will want and need support to improve adoption services. While the LGA is firmly opposed to crude judgements about performance, it is important that the sector takes the initiative where there is an important improvement challenge which is crucial to the lives of children and young people. The CIB will work with councils to understand better where there are genuine difficulties, taking into account the needs of the local area and the way that services are delivered and will respond where support is needed.
9. Support to councils which is sector-led needs to draw on councils' views of the problems they face and the support they need. On 9 February, the CIB convened a consultative event to discuss the challenges presented by the Munro Review and social work reform. Over forty participants mainly from local councils attended the event. Feedback from participants confirmed enthusiasm for taking forward the Munro Review and social work reform. However, while implementation is underway in some places and some good practice is emerging, this is a significant challenge for councils and their partners, particularly in terms of understanding what early help means for a local area and making changes that influence the whole system. There is already some activity underway to support councils through regions. So next steps will involve a rapid mapping exercise of this activity, an expectation that all regions will

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make Munro a focus of their support to councils during 2012-13 and further discussion of where and how a national support offer can add value to this regional activity.

Data profiles

10. The CIB is working with councils to develop a common data set for children's services. This draws on data that is already available and does not claim to be comprehensive or to be the only source of information or intelligence about performance. It provides a core of common data for use by the councils and to act as a potential starting point for peer challenge. A prototype data profile is being piloted with ten councils around the country. Pilot authorities are also being asked about the feasibility of collecting the proposed local performance information in the Munro Performance Framework. The pilot authorities who are working through February and March are:
 - 10.1. Blackburn with Darwen
 - 10.2. Bristol
 - 10.3. Camden
 - 10.4. Gateshead
 - 10.5. Islington
 - 10.6. Nottinghamshire
 - 10.7. Oxfordshire
 - 10.8. Sheffield
 - 10.9. Thurrock
 - 10.10. Walsall

11. Other authorities who are interested in viewing their prototype data profile are able to do this through the LGA's Knowledge Hub. The intention is to integrate the profiles with other comparative data available to councils through LGINform.

Financial Implications

12. 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.