

Children's Improvement Board (CIB) – update on sector-led improvement

Purpose of report

To update members of the Improvement Board on the work of the Children's Improvement Board (CIB). A similar update report was presented to the LGA Executive on 12 July 2012.

Summary

This report updates the Improvement Board on sector-led improvement in children's services being taken forward through the Children's Improvement Board.

Recommendation

That members of the Improvement Board consider the progress of sector-led improvement in children's services and any issues arising.

Action

That members encourage the active promotion of the work of CIB within political networks as part of the approach to set out in "Sector-led improvement in local government" (June 2012 – see below).

Contact officer:

Alison Miller / Nick Easton

Position:

Adviser, Programme Teams / Senior Adviser

Phone no:

020 7664 3036 / 020 7664 3278

E-mail:

alison.miller@local.gov.uk / nick.easton@local.gov.uk

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Background

1. Following consideration by the Improvement Board at its meeting in March 2012 and in the light of subsequent comments from members, the LGA has published "Sector-led improvement in local government" providing an overarching framework for sector led improvement across council services¹. This narrative, describes a coordinated approach and offer of support, including support in children's and adults services. It is aimed at council leaders, portfolio holders, chief executive and directors and provided the background to a number of sessions at the LGA Annual Conference.
2. Sector-led improvement in children's services is being taken forward through the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) - 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 the Department for Education (DfE). The work of the Board draws extensively upon in kind contributions from the sector, particularly in terms of time and expertise. It is also supported by a DfE grant of £8.85 million in this financial year.
3. The Improvement Board last received a report on sector-led improvement in children's services on 8 September 2011. Since then, funding has been agreed by DfE for 2012-13, signalling support for this sector-led approach from Ministers. Significant progress has been made in building ownership of sector-led improvement in councils amongst members and officers with direct responsibilities for children's services but much remains to be done in embedding this more corporately as part of local government's approach to sector-led improvement. This report gives a summary of progress and key learning from what has been, effectively, the first nine months of CIB operation.
4. A significant part of sector-led improvement for children's services is delivered regionally, supported by funding devolved by CIB within a national framework. Each region has its own way of working and delivering sector-led improvement but each has a nominated "regional lead" councillor, director of children's services and chief executive. Each region has also been allocated a sum of money for programme management and delivery.

¹ <http://www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement>

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Priorities for 2012-13

5. The CIB's priorities for 2012-13 are: reducing the number of councils in intervention; establishing an effective system of peer challenge and support (in the context of sector led improvement in children's services "peer challenge" refers to Director to Director challenge, for which a number of different models are being developed by councils working together in regions); better engagement of stakeholders and supporting councils in managing the impact of policies. Support for councils in managing the impact of policies is grouped in four areas:
 - 6.1. The Munro Review, social work reform and early help.
 - 6.2. Adoption, children in care and the Family Justice Review.
 - 6.3. Early and foundation years, commissioning sufficiency and quality and narrowing the gap in achievement for children up to five.
 - 6.4. And three more discrete issues – data profiles, innovation and commissioning for youth services and integrated workforce (legacy of the Children's Workforce Development Council).

6. These national priorities will be delivered through a mix of national and regional activity. All regions have been asked to prioritise peer challenge between councils and the identification and support of councils who might be in difficulty. Regions support the national policy programmes but are also planning work which goes beyond the issues identified nationally. Examples of regional work planned for this year which extends the scope of policy support include child poverty, the relationship between councils and schools, links with health, and the SEN Green Paper and child sexual exploitation. Support for councils in managing the impact of policy changes fits within the universal "improvement programmes" in the strategic model below.

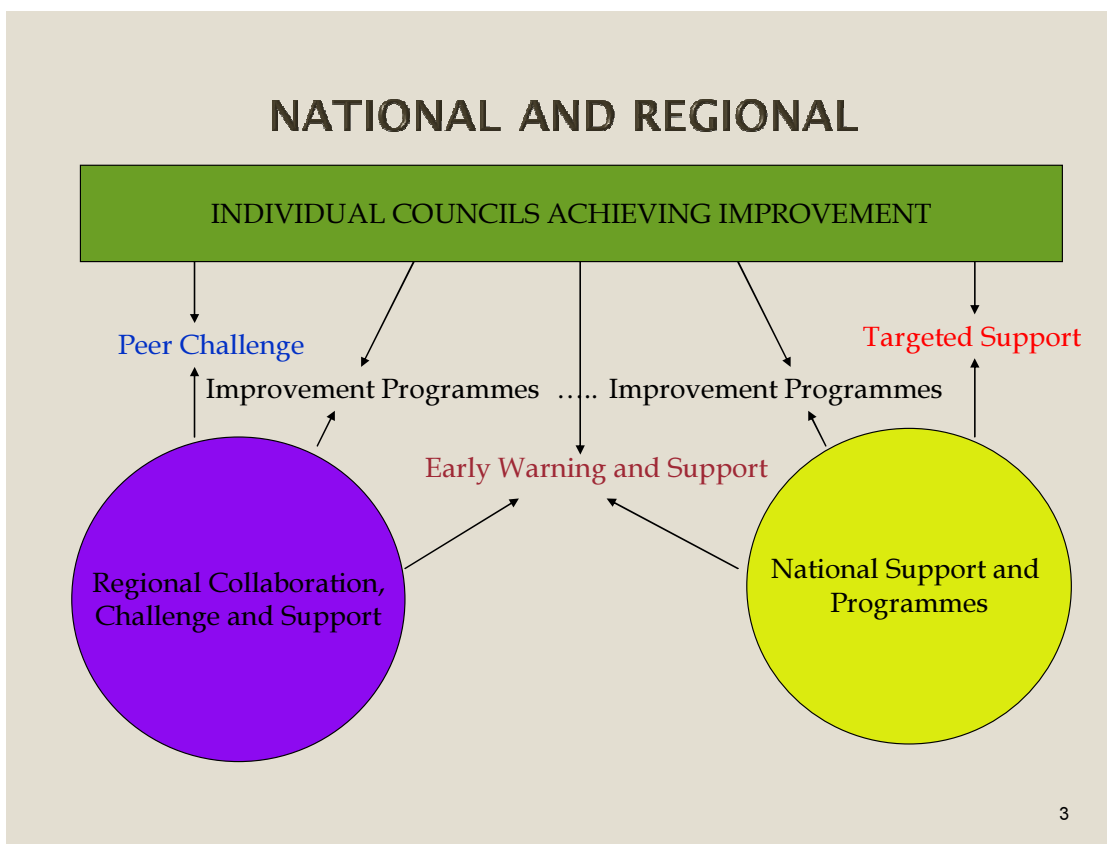
The strategic model

7. The following diagram shows how both national and regional programmes support improvement in councils. Regions are expected to develop their capacity to identify those councils who might be at risk ("early warning") and therefore in need of "early support" from their peers. Where councils are subject to DfE improvement notices, their "targeted support" is resourced nationally and the CIB team is in direct contact with these councils. All regions have a systematic approach to peer challenge in place and every council will have received a peer challenge from others by the end of 2012.

8. In order to ensure that the work supported by CIB builds on and forms part of the wider drive for sector-led improvement, CIB works closely with the Leadership and Productivity Programme at the LGA. In terms of support for

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individual councils, the LGA’s Principal Advisors are responsible for “managing the risk of underperformance” in any one council using the intelligence and support that is provided through the regional structures and through the CIB. The CIB’s “Children’s Improvement Advisers” who provide the direct, targeted support to councils, carry out this work in partnership with the LGA’s Principal Advisors. By working together the CIB and LGA teams can make sure that the support offer to councils is coherent and that both corporate and children’s services improvement needs are addressed appropriately.



Overview at the end of the first quarter of 2012-13

9. The first quarter has seen the CIB consolidate previous work and mark out a clearer strategic direction. Considerable time has been spent in strengthening key stakeholder relationships, particularly through direct dialogue with the regional leads and this work is being extended to member networks in the next six months. The end of the quarter has seen an increased level of delivery and examples of early impact, reflected through the activities now underway at both regional and national level. This includes examples of effective preventative work to avoid safeguarding failure and support in managing policy impact around early years, youth and adoption.

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10. Nevertheless the incidence of inspection failure remains unacceptably high. This means that significant resources from CIB are needed to support the small minority of councils in intervention and away from contributing to the work of early support and universal improvement. The CIB is in dialogue with Ofsted about the relationship between their developing inspection programme and sector-led improvement but the sector needs to accept that the best defence is stronger self-assessment with the rigour of external referencing and peer challenge.
11. CIB has also taken the view that it should offer support to any councils who fell below the performance thresholds on timeliness for adoption set by the Government - despite concern about the Government's overall approach. CIB has offered direct support to any councils that have been identified by DfE as causing particular concern. CIB has also commissioned, jointly with DfE, a diagnostic assessment which is being used in some cases to provide further information about an individual council's performance on adoption and to allow the council to tell the story behind the data.

Key learning from the first quarter of this year

12. The most efficient and effective basis of improvement in children's services is through a realistic system of self assessment and a commitment to change policy and practice in implementing its recommendations for improvement. Current evidence from early warning and inspection indicates that external referencing and challenge is fundamental to understanding what "good" or "adequate" looks like in practice and in giving a perspective on the pace and momentum required to effect improvement. Intelligent use of comparative data, professional development opportunities and processes of peer challenge and safeguarding peer review are important tools for providing this.
13. Individual councils remain pivotal to sector-led improvement. The best peer support and challenge can still be misplaced, rendered ineffective or in contrast can become truly transformational depending on the readiness of the internal organisation and its partners to change. A whole sector approach relating to the wider corporate agenda (bringing different strands of sector-led support together) is essential in tackling each of the key elements of leadership, workforce and systems and in creating a climate with central government that enables the necessary cultural shift to co-operative learning and improvement endeavour.
14. Regional structures and more importantly, relationships, are at different stages of development and require both opportunities for sharing ideas between them and continued capacity for programme support. CIB Children's Improvement Advisers must provide both challenge and support around the critical area of

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early warning and support. As the system matures there may be scope for a differentiated approach based on a reward grant for effective prevention.

15. There is a considerable amount of planned activity involving strategic leaders and service heads in children's services from a range of sources. Even the judicious use of meetings needs to be done with a fuller awareness of these other demands and as much early notice as possible. Consistent feedback is that learning and development needs to be interactive, applied to current challenges and that theory is best understood in an applied context with meaningful exemplification and through observed practice. There needs to be a rigorous approach to support activity determined by the criteria that it leads to changed policy or practice which, in turn, promotes, facilitates or leads directly to improved outcomes for children.
16. The window for demonstrating the effectiveness of the strategic model and addressing the sustainability of the CIB approach is until the end of Q3 2013-14 (December 2013). By that time a comprehensive and rigorous evaluation needs to have been completed looking at the impact from October 2011 until October 2013 and recommending a sustainable future approach. Anticipation of this and the learning from the current year will need to be reflected in decisions on how to deploy a reduced resource grant from April 2013.

Financial implications

17. 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.