

**Early Years, Children and Youth Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel
25th March 2013**

Re: Sector Led Improvement and engagement by Bath and North East Somerset

The Sector Led Improvement initiative started in 2010 as a result of discussion between the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association. The LGA proposal was that Local Authorities could secure their own Service Improvement through a process of Peer Challenge and Peer Review.

Particular emphasis has been given to the improvement of Adult Social Care Services and Children's Services. In relation to Children's Services the Department for Education as the lead central government department have placed a particular emphasis on the improvement of services for children in receipt of Social Care.

In the South West the 16 Local Authorities responsible for Children's Services have formed a local Children's Improvement Board which is Chaired by Councillor Toni Coombs, Lead Member for Children's Services for Dorset County Council. Other Board members include 2 Chief Executives from the South West, 2 Directors of Children's Services and 3 other Lead Members from South West Authorities.

The programme of peer challenge in the South West has been driven by a region wide analysis of key developmental areas for each Service.

Through a combination of analysis of past Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection, previous Annual Performance Appraisal letters and a Self-Assessment carried out by each Local Authority, 3 clear priorities for peer challenge were identified as follows:-

- Adoption
- Diversion from care
- Safeguarding Services and thresholds for access to Service

Each of the 16 Local Authorities were asked to choose 1 of the 3 priority areas for a Peer Challenge. However, where the above issues were not a key developmental need for an individual Local Authority, that Local Authority was able to select an area for Peer Challenge other than the 3 identified. In this regard, Dorset County Council chose to look at its response to Domestic Violence Referrals and Bournemouth Local Authority considered its response to children with Special Educational Needs.

Each Authority was then matched with a Peer Challenger and preparations made between the Authority to receive and deliver the challenge for a robust process.

For Bath and North East Somerset, we selected an area of focus around children to be diverted from care.

Dorset County Council were selected to be our Peer Challenger and arrangements were made for the Peer Challenge to take place in January 2013. A series of front line staff and Service Managers presented on the range of Services currently in place to prevent the need for Children to be received into public care. This covered the age range from childhood – early childhood through to 17/18 years of age.

Colleagues from Dorset reviewed our data and performance and then questioned the staff about the efficacy of the Services provided.

A feedback session was then organised for the following week where Dorset provided their view on the effectiveness of our Services for diverting children and young people from the care system and made suggestions as to further work that Bath and North East Somerset could undertake to improve the Service offer made. This feedback is now being taken forward in terms of strengthening our data collection and understanding the needs of children as they first present to the Children's Social Care teams and we will be reviewing the work of the Specialist Child and Family Support Service and Project 117. Within the piece of work we will be carrying out we will seek to define our early help offer. This piece of work now also has to reflect the feedback from the unannounced inspection of services for protecting children which happened on March 4 – March 13 2013. This will require the Authority to further consider its support for children and young people and families prior to the formal engagement with the Social Care Services provided by the Authority.

Bath and North East Somerset acted as a Peer Challenger to Swindon, which had chosen the area of thresholds and access to safeguarding services. This challenge was led by Maurice Lindsay (Divisional Director for Safeguarding, Social Care and Family Service) supported by Trina Shane (Service Manager), Julie Morris (Team Manager), Sara Willis (Early Years and Extended Services Manager) and Caroline Dowson who manages our Early Intervention and Common Assessment framework.

This challenge followed a similar pattern to the one experienced by Bath and North East Somerset and BANES staff visited Swindon on 2 occasions. On Day 1 a series of presentations were made about how the safeguarding threshold worked in Swindon and Day 2 consisted of a process of feeding back the findings of the BANES Team.

Following the Peer Challenge visits, I received letters of thanks from both the Strategic Director for Children and Young People's Services and also from Councillor David Rennard, Lead Member for Children's Services with Swindon Borough.

Overall the process has been managed to allow for an open and frank dialogue between Authorities about levels of performance and pressures that

are being experienced within Children's Social Care Services across the region. It was the clear intent of the regional Children's Improvement Board and the Directors of Children's Services that the Peer Challenge should not feel as if it is an inspection by Ofsted. The key was to enable open and frank discussion. Each Authority that has taken part in the Peer Challenge is now working on an action plan for improvement in the areas submitted for the challenge and the regional Board has provided each Authority with a small sum of money to facilitate continued partnership working across the Authorities who challenged each other.

A report on the quality and effectiveness of the Peer Challenges is now being coordinated and will be submitted to the National Children's Improvement Board by the end of March.

A further round of Peer Challenges will begin in late summer 2013 concluding in late January 2014. The regional Board and the 16 Directors of Children's Services have agreed that the focus should continue to be around safeguarding services, thresholds for action and the quality of the early help and preventative support made available to children and families.

As a Director of Children's Services, I have found the Peer Challenge process to be immensely helpful. We were able to engage a number of key front line staff in discussing their work and whilst the process was very challenging, it was also professionally rewarding for both the recipient Authority and the Authority providing the challenge.

We intend to fully engage in the next round of Peer Challenges and are currently working on a refresh of our self-assessment as are all other Local Authorities within the South West Region. Until the end of March, I had been the Regional Lead of Sector Led Improvement with a particular emphasis on supporting those Authorities facing the greatest level of challenge. This has been professionally rewarding and has enabled me to transfer some learning back into Bath and North East Somerset with a view to improving our own performance. From 1 April 2013 the lead responsibility will pass to Annie Hudson, Director of Children's Services for Bristol City Council and Linda Uren, Director of Children's Services for Gloucestershire County Council.

I would be happy to bring a further report to the Panel when the next round of peer challenges are underway.

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