

Independent Review of the South East Region Peer Challenge Process by ADCS

1. Introduction

In April 2019, the South East Sector-Led Improvement Partnership (SESLIP) team and the South East regional DCS group commissioned the ADCS staff team to undertake an independent evaluation of the region's peer challenge processes to assess what worked well, what should be retained for future challenges, and how to improve the overall process.

ADCS conducted telephone interviews with colleagues from the 16 local authorities which took part in the process. They were: Bracknell Forest, Brighton & Hove, Buckinghamshire, East Sussex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Medway, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire, Reading, Slough, Southampton, Surrey, West Berkshire, Windsor & Maidenhead and Wokingham. Three LAs from the region (Kent, Portsmouth and West Sussex) did not undertake a Triad peer challenge, and therefore were not contacted as part of this review

Our sincere thanks to everyone who took the time to contribute to this exercise.

2. Summary

For 2018/19 the region agreed to arrange a process for each children's service to conduct and share a self-evaluation; to join a 'Triad' or quartet of authorities (Hampshire and Isle of Wight have a shared DCS and formed a 'quartet' peer challenge rather than a Triad); and, to engage in a peer challenge process. The timetable was intended to allow the peer challenges to take place ahead of Ofsted's annual engagement conversations. A detailed description of the current process can be found [here](#).

Overall, colleagues felt that for the first iteration of this model of peer challenge it was sufficiently useful and that covering the totality of service was the right thing to do, but that aspects should be streamlined going forward.

The views offered by participants were conflicting, and this report reflects those contradictions. Therefore, rather than make direct recommendations, this report raises discussion points for consideration during the planning of future cycles of peer challenge.

Key findings:

- Overall, colleagues felt that for the first iteration of this model of peer challenge it was sufficiently useful and that covering the totality of service was the right thing to do, but that aspects should be streamlined going forward
- Colleagues see the peer challenge process as a dry run ahead of annual conversations with Ofsted, therefore, felt it was essential that timings are brought forward to ensure that all peer challenge days take place ahead of those conversations
- The Triad/Quartet arrangements have, on the whole, been well received and colleagues are content for the same cohorts to be revisited for at least another cycle
- The three main elements of the peer challenge process - data profile analysis, self-evaluation and summary presentation – are helpful and should be retained. Within the time constraints, these combined elements provide sufficient information to allow colleagues to carry out benchmarking, to compare and contrast, and to form the focal point for face-to-face exchanges – all of which are highly valued by participants

- Peer challenge without facilitation works less well, therefore facilitation is a must for future cycles. Consideration should be given to how facilitators could enable conversations to have a little more space to move off script
- A template for self-evaluation is not needed, however, a loose framework could be beneficial
- Colleagues felt it was important for a piece of work to be undertaken comparing the feedback offered by the SESLIP team to that offered by Ofsted
- There may be value in SESLIP commissioning experts on particular subjects to carry out one-off activities/deep dives when the level of expertise is not available from within existing capacity
- Colleagues would value sight of self-evaluations from across the region, not just within Triad.

3. Colleagues value participating in peer challenge processes, and believe that the opportunity to look at their service in its totality is particularly important

Colleagues stressed the importance of having peer challenge that covers the totality of the service, especially in the context of the silos in which central government departments operate and a siloed inspection regime.

Colleagues value the networking opportunities, relationship building and support that coming together with colleagues brings. Meeting with trusted peers in a safe environment, to receive honest challenge and feedback was warmly welcomed. Indeed, several participants have suggested that beneficial connections with peers would not have happened without meeting under these circumstances.

There is great value in the self-reflection which the process demands – the opportunities to consider established areas of work and to reflect on the validity of how that work is being done is very important. The preparatory work undertaken in advance of peer challenge aids the process of both scrutinising and being scrutinised and is helpful in preparations for the annual conversation with Ofsted. The high stakes inspection regime causes great anxiety and as a result, colleagues can, at times, be overly self-critical; this process offers an excellent opportunity to give and receive positive feedback alongside constructive challenge, which can offer a confidence and validity to the work being done in children's services departments.

Colleagues value being with people they trust – and would rather a peer “call them out”, than Ofsted. Building a set of trusted relationships can empower individuals to ask for help from peers.

Softer intelligence can be shared during this process, which is equally valuable e.g. recommendations of good consultants/interims. It can also help boost morale; help foreground positive practice or developments; and lighten the relentless focus on bad news and budget deficits. Colleagues reported feeling enthused and positive about the future.

Going forward the regional DCS group and SESLIP must be clear that the peer challenge process is reviewing the totality of the services which DCSs and their teams are responsible for. Colleagues need to be assured that this peer-challenge process is about more than ‘just’ social care.

The full service ‘helicopter’ view helps to take stock of the bigger picture and plays a vital role in identifying specific themes which can in turn inform the thematic challenges that are needed locally.

Further comments included:

- *“Signing up to a regional sector-led improvement programme is signing up to be brave; offering permission to challenge and to be challenged – it’s important to do it”*
- *“It is intellectually valuable, but not sure the process is right”.*

Discussion point:

One LA suggested that rather than a full-service review they would prefer a thematic approach with each LA bringing 3 areas of strength and 3 areas of weakness. Is there interest to do this instead of, or as well as, the full-service peer challenge?

4. The Triad/Quartet arrangements have, on the whole, been well received and colleagues are content for the same cohorts to be revisited for at least another cycle

Cohorts were arranged by mixing different types of LA with differing inspection judgements. The cohorts for 2018/19 were as follows:

Triad	LA1	LA2	LA3
1	Wokingham	East Sussex	Surrey
2*	West Sussex	Kent	Portsmouth
Quartet 3	Slough	Hampshire and Isle of Wight	Milton Keynes
4	Windsor and Maidenhead	Oxfordshire	Medway
5	West Berkshire	Buckinghamshire	Brighton and Hove
6	Bracknell Forest	Reading	Southampton

*Triad 2 did not take place

Overall, participants were content to continue with the current arrangements for at least another cycle of peer challenge. The mix of different types of LA with different Ofsted judgements has largely been welcomed, this approach assists in getting under the skin of issues and provides a greater depth of challenge. Unitary authorities particularly welcomed the opportunity to ‘think big’.

That said, some participants advocated for the separating of counties from unitary authorities in future peer challenges so that more significant and relevant learning can be gained from similar sized organisations – a ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ unitary, for example, could provide more relevant transferable learning to another unitary on an improvement journey. Similarly, counties at different stages of their improvement journey may gain greater benefit and learning from fellow county colleagues. Other colleagues voiced concerns about whether a small unitary authority on an improvement journey could offer real challenge to an ‘outstanding’ county council, for example.

Other suggestions included changing the cohorts to prevent colleagues from getting too comfortable with each other - this could also provide broader networking opportunities and refreshed vigour.

The option of running two cohorts of peer challenge has been suggested; one utilising a streamlined version of the current model, the other pulling together similar graded and types of authorities.

Discussion point:

Are the current mixed arrangements right and might additional peer challenges overcome any barriers?

Benefit to wider teams

The majority of colleagues made reference to the value brought to their wider teams by engaging in peer challenge – those engaged within their authorities in preparing the information, and more specifically, to those whom participated in the challenge process itself - highlighting the learning opportunity; the professional development; and the opportunity to connect and showcase themselves at a regional level as the main benefits.

Further comments included:

- *“My team benefited from seeing professional challenge in action and to engage with real strategic thinking”*
- *“This process is validating and energising to a team that has had a very difficult time”*
- *“This makes it feel that the work they have been asked to do in preparation has been both valuable and worthwhile”.*

Additionally, one colleague highlighted the fringe benefit derived from the preparatory discussions and post-challenge reflections whilst travelling together to the challenge site.

5. The timing of the peer-challenges

Colleagues see the peer challenge process as a dry run ahead of annual conversations with Ofsted, therefore, felt it was essential that timings are brought forward to ensure that all peer challenge days take place ahead of those conversations.

Discussion point:

Is it feasible to conduct all peer challenges ahead of the 2020 annual conversations with Ofsted?

6. The process

The three main elements of the peer challenge process - data profile analysis, self-evaluation and summary presentation – are helpful and should be retained. Within the time constraints, these combined elements provide sufficient information to allow colleagues to carry out benchmarking, to compare and contrast, and to form the focal point for face-to-face exchanges – all of which are highly valued by participants.

Colleagues reflected that having teams of three from each LA has worked well and allows the space for all to contribute, to reflect and to avoid being overwhelmed by sheer volume of input.

Some valued the preparatory training day and scene setting. Developing an understanding of what was intended to be achieved and the discussions on reaching mutual agreement regarding the parameters and purpose of peer challenge across the region was welcome. Some felt that the expectations laid out in advance were not replicated on the peer challenge day.

Participants believed it is process heavy and should be streamlined in future iterations

Many colleagues believe the process, as a whole, is perhaps too prescriptive and too rigid, with greater flexibility on the day needed by some facilitators to allow the conversations and challenges to flow and develop. One participant suggested that the restrictions of the process made some of the discussions feel forced (if you are meant to offer a positive comment first, but don't have anything positive to say) and that there isn't always the opportunity to speak – as a result the moment can be lost and an area of challenge can fail to be highlighted.

Several colleagues felt that presenting a full self-evaluation in 15 minutes was difficult. Time is limited so it was suggested that more could be done by the SESLIP team in advance to pull together overview documents or to suggest alternatives to how these presentations are made. Similarly, identifying exactly what should be included and what the expectations are could assist in this task. This can reduce any frustrations that arise through conversations and observations being foreshortened by the need to move on to something else.

It was suggested that re-ordering inputs to allow for a more positive start to proceedings would be sensible e.g. not asking 'inadequate' LAs to go first.

Discussion point:

A number of colleagues made reference to a lighter tough approach to peer challenge in other regions; does the South East process need stripping back in future iterations?

Facilitation

The facilitation undertaken by the SESLIP team generally received positive feedback with several colleagues stating that the team offered good, appropriate questions at the right time, which aided the flow of conversations and made it easy to get the engagement going.

Some colleagues had experienced peer challenge without facilitation which worked less well, therefore facilitation is a must for future cycles. Consideration should be given to how facilitators could enable conversations to have a little more space to move off script.

The handbook and associated paperwork should be streamlined

Colleagues would like to see the handbook and associated paperwork streamlined, some suggested that the theoretical detail and/or case studies could be cut back.

Silent observer

The silent observer element of the process divided opinion. Several colleagues felt this jarred or was awkward, one stating "as senior leaders we should be able to go beyond the contrived". However, others stated they enjoyed this aspect and benefitted from listening to hypotheses about their service and receiving strong objective feedback whilst maintaining a 'distance' from the conversation.

Discussion point:

Should the silent observer element be included in future peer challenges?

Capturing the learning

Many colleagues felt it was a missed opportunity not to capture the learning at the end of the peer challenge day. Consideration should be given to how SESLIP facilitators could implement this on the day. A number of suggestions were put forward to disseminate the learning including formal briefings for each service area and an overview piece summarising the main themes and concerns common across the region. The possibility of developing action learning sets was also suggested. Some felt a succinct piece of formal feedback could be developed for use with Chief Executives, Lead Members etc to complement the messages around practice development, investment needs, and so on.

Discussion points:

Is this feasible within existing SESLIP capacity? If not, is greater capacity needed or can other aspects of the process be trimmed to accommodate? What would the captured learning look like?

A number of participants highlighted the fact that this is an officer-led exercise. The potential to include reflections from Lead Members, and possibly gain their feedback, may add further value.

Discussion point:

Do colleagues want to involve Lead Members in the process? If so, in part, or for all?

Aside from the overall sense of the peer challenge being “process heavy” few criticisms were made; however, two conflicting observations really capture the differences of opinion on the process:

- *“The current process is too general - we need to work to make peer challenge more forensic”*
- *“Process must be more pragmatic – there isn’t sufficient time for some of the theoretical aspects, in particular some of the educational psychology is wasted “.*

Discussion point:

Do colleagues want a forensic approach or pragmatic approach to peer challenge?

7. Data

The South East data group provides robust data and analysis, which are utilised to different extents across the region. A collective decision must be made on exactly what data are to be used for the purpose of future peer challenges. If the peer challenge process is to review the totality of the service, data on all areas of service must be included alongside social care data. The challenge of doing so should not be under-estimated.

Clarity as to what to include may encourage all areas to ensure their submissions and contributions to the regional data groups are made.

Discussion point:

What data are to be used for the peer challenges?

Several colleagues acknowledged they do not make full use of the data available to them. This peer challenge process has illustrated how they can help themselves by doing more on data benchmarking and compare and contrast activities. Others described how this process in particular has given more confidence in their data and its use in their day-to-day work.

More time spent in advance of the peer challenge looking at data could result in better use of time for conversations rather than analysing datasets. In line with the suggestions for streamlining the process, several colleagues commented on the need to be sensible and economic with data in both their LA and in peer challenge.

Colleagues recognised that data alone cannot show the quality of practice, nor can it be relied upon solely to identify weaknesses. It must be coupled with qualitative and case study information.

Discussion point:

Could the use of data be refined with a sharper focus on what Ofsted lead inspectors are likely to look at?

8. A template for self-evaluation is not needed, however, a loose framework could be beneficial

Participants felt the freedom to display information appropriate to their locality was essential and felt a template may hinder the process of writing a self-evaluation. Preparing the self-evaluation offers an opportunity for further self-reflection as materials are prepared and rehearsed.

The variety of approaches to completing the self-evaluation also provided an additional stream of learning to participants. Colleagues, on the whole, only see the self-evaluations from their Triad – the opportunity for sight of self-evaluations from across the region would be useful to others.

Many colleagues suggested working towards a single self-evaluation document which can be used for peer challenge, with inspectors and with their own organisations. Similarly, having a self-evaluation that has been peer reviewed and challenged could provide DCSs and their teams with a valuable tool that could be used with more awareness, assertiveness and confidence with corporate management teams and Lead Members.

That said, several participants suggested that a loose framework would be beneficial to ensure that there is a common approach to self-evaluation, setting out minimum expectations. Moreover, this could assist when reviewing the self-evaluations from other localities on peer challenge days – working within a loose framework may allow more space to make more informed hypotheses, which in turn will result in more constructive conversations.

Having a framework can also ensure that the right people are involved in the sessions – if the challenge is about the totality of the service, SEND and education leads, for example, can play a valuable role in the challenge day – it's not all social care. Several participants felt that education was not included enough in the discussions even though it was an important element of their self-evaluation.

Some LAs which use a single self-evaluation for both sector-led improvement and Ofsted purposes, omitted areas of weakness from their self-evaluation, asking why you would address something you're not doing well, or not doing at all. While this may project a particular image, it does not

necessarily assist them in terms of being open to challenge or improvement in those areas. A framework for self-evaluation could consider including a section on areas for development.

Discussion point:

Is a loose framework for self-evaluations helpful or not?

Comparing the self-evaluation feedback offered by SESLIP team and that offered by Ofsted

Many colleagues found the SESLIP feedback on self-evaluations to be useful and thoroughly valued having their work sense checked.

Colleagues felt it was important for a piece of work to be undertaken comparing the feedback offered by the SESLIP team to that offered by Ofsted. Although at the time the SESLIP feedback was found to be useful, in several cases it conflicted with feedback from Ofsted, particularly in relation to the level of detail, with Ofsted looking for focus rather than 'exposing all the wiring'.

Discussion point:

Is there value, and capacity, to compare the feedback offered by SESLIP with that offered by Ofsted on self-evaluations?

Additional comments

Some additional comments are important to note.

- Colleagues often referred to what a good self-evaluation looks like, with certain examples receiving particular praise from Ofsted. Using good examples to showcase across the region (and wider), would be of huge benefit. It is important to be conversant with Ofsted colleagues to help shape this
- It has been suggested that SESLIP could undertake a mapping exercise analysing data against narrative before the peer-challenge day to highlight any potential mismatches or areas of concern – is there capacity to do this?
- Query raised as to whether all SESLIP colleagues fully understand the education data and narrative within self-evaluation – is there a consultant with an education background currently involved with the support offer from SESLIP?

9. Presentations

As with self-evaluations, authorities generally valued flexibility when preparing their presentations ahead of the peer challenge day. However, unlike the self-evaluation, there was no appetite for a framework or template to structure and display the presentation.

The important element, again, is the mutual learning gained from the different ways colleagues present themselves, the areas they focus on and the messages conveyed about their authorities. Colleagues gained inspiration and alternative takes on ways to present in the future.

10. Domestic arrangements

The majority of participants had no issues with the venues used, nor facilities on offer and have passed on thanks to the efforts made by the SESLIP team for ensuring that all domestic

arrangements were in place and were of such good quality. Some comments suggested that more thought is required on room set-ups in some locations used.

However, it was suggested that council facilities should be used to host meetings on a reciprocal basis, resulting in arrangements being almost free of charge – there were strong opinions against using SESLIP monies on private venues.

11. Is SLI work truly able to identify an LA that is about to fall – and if so, are their peers able to catch them?

A number of colleagues raised the issue of catching an LA before it falls, and whether sector-led improvement initiatives, including peer challenge, are currently able to intercede effectively if an LA is on a downward trajectory.

Colleagues are aware that data doesn't tell the full story and that the self-view of an LA can be presented in a way that masks inadequacies. If an authority believes it is on a particular trajectory which shapes its narrative message, and the data apparently concur, challenge can become very difficult.

Conversely, a combination of data, self-evaluation, and wider 'soft intelligence' may provide enough evidence should a colleague feel that concerns need to be raised through an escalation process.

Colleagues suggested that a formal piece of succinct peer-reviewed feedback from the SESLIP team, coupled with the materials used in the peer challenge process, could provide greater evidence for use with Chief Executives *et al* if escalation to that level was deemed necessary.

Discussion point:

How confident can colleagues be in identifying declining performance through the peer challenge process – is the system sufficiently robust to catch before they fall?

12. SESLIP

Participants have spoken very positively about the SESLIP team and the work done to support the peer challenge process.

It is vital when supporting colleagues in senior roles in local authorities that as much assistance and groundwork is done for them as possible considering the constraints reduced budgets are having on DCSs and their teams. Reducing the demands on LA colleagues and the streamlining of processes and materials is a perennial consideration in the support work on offer.

Regional work takes second place to the day-to-day work ongoing in authorities; the patience and persistence of SESLIP colleagues in pulling everything together is both appreciated and understood.

There may be value in SESLIP commissioning experts on particular subjects to carry out one-off activities/deep dives when the level of expertise is not available from within existing capacity. As employing consultants can be expensive, could those already working as Heads of Service or similar in a LA setting be utilised more to undertake these activities, in the real sense of sector-led improvement?

Several colleagues suggested that SESLIP could provide a support brokerage service. Utilising existing knowledge and learning from the peer challenge process, SESLIP could create a directory of support

and actively match colleagues. Matches could take place based on thematic areas of strength/weakness and across other thematic areas. For example, through the peer challenge process, a group of unitary authorities with 'RI' grades who are awaiting inspection, have come together to share preparatory work, review self-evaluations, annex A documents etc.

Discussion points:

Could SESLIP act as a broker for support? Is there enough capacity? How would brokerage be quality assured?

13. Conclusions / what difference does it make?

Colleagues recognised that for a first attempt, the Triad/Quartet peer challenge process had been a useful and valuable exercise.

Colleagues reported a sense of confidence, assuredness and raised awareness as a result of their peer challenge. Making connections and having challenging conversations safely with colleagues would not happen outside of this forum. Hearing from colleagues with similar challenges and receiving positive feedback is both reassuring and validating. Colleagues noted the importance, irrelevant of their inspection grade, of having the same level of scrutiny to maintain/improve standards. Many colleagues were heartened to see that complex processes and initiatives aren't always needed to be 'good' or better – good quality practice from a confident workforce is far more valuable.

Involving more people from the LA in the wider process of self-evaluation and improvement, both in advance and as part of the peer-challenge team, delivers great learning and insight into the broader work taking place.

The process can help colleagues identify areas that require attention, which may not have been obvious without the challenge/scrutiny of colleagues, e.g. quality assurance processes, SEND provision. Taking away new ideas, new ways of working and areas of focus is of great benefit. Colleagues also found the process enhanced their understanding and that of their teams of the wider corporate context.

Interestingly, one LA was able to negotiate better PiP support as a result of the groundwork put into the peer challenge process – much of the analysis had been done, therefore the PiP support could be more solution focussed rather than diagnostic.

A number of participants suggested that they will commit to more preparation time in the future, acknowledging that SELIP had suggested that it was necessary. As well as emphasising this ahead of the next cycle, a number of colleagues suggested that having space for reflection after reading the materials ahead of the day would be incredibly valuable.

In summary, this report concludes that SESLIP should:

- Run with another cycle of Triad/Quartet peer challenge, maintaining the existing cohorts, but streamlining the process in line with the comments raised in this review
- Consult with other regions to compare and analyse what works with their respective peer challenge processes
- Produce a post challenge summary briefing for each LA for use with their wider teams
- Produce a follow up summary of the process as a whole

- Identify common themes across the region which need a deeper focus and assess current regional offers/programmes to see if they match against these areas
- Work towards brokering support. Use the process to identify strengths and areas for development and produce a directory of support to assist matching offers with needs of LAs
- After the next cycle assess how to arrange future cohorts.

(Author: Gary Dumbarton, The ADCS Ltd, June 2019)