

Self Assessment and Peer Challenge Review

Insight Sharing from Other Regions

AUGUST 2026



Introduction and context

- SESLIP is undertaking a review of the Self-Assessment and Peer Challenge Process, which has been established and in operation for several years. The review has been commissioned to:
 - Identify any changes required to ensure the process aligns with the expectations set out in the RIIA 2026/27 Statement of Requirements.
 - Identify any enhancements needed to ensure the process meets the expectations of Directors of Children's Services and their leadership teams across the 19 South East local authorities.
- During August 2026, engagement took place with the Regional Innovation and Improvement Alliance Programme Managers across the country to explore their approaches to regional diagnostics and to identify learning and good practice that could be adapted and applied within the South East.
- This report provides a summary of the key findings and insights gathered from those discussions.
- If you have any questions, please contact selinarattu@gmail.com

Key commonalities



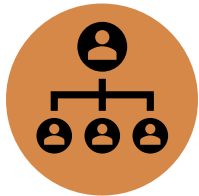
Shared purpose of peer challenge and improvement

- All regions use the process to facilitate peer review, challenge practice, share learning and encourage professional reflection.
- The emphasis is on sector-led improvement rather than formal assessment.



Evidence based discussions

- Most regions require pre-work, including self-assessment, performance data, audits or reflective summaries.
- Challenge conversations are grounded in evidence and local practice.



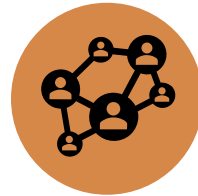
Senior leadership involvement

- DCSs and senior leadership teams are consistently involved across regions.
- Learning Assessments are viewed as a strategic leadership activity.



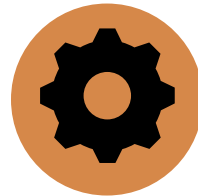
Preference for face-to-face engagement

- Most regions deliver sessions in person, either as full-day or half-day events.
- Building relationships, trust and open discussion are recurring benefits.



Peer learning and networking benefits

- Regions consistently value the opportunity to share practice, learn from colleagues and develop stronger professional networks.
- Participants view the process as mutually beneficial rather than solely evaluative.



Regional improvement focus

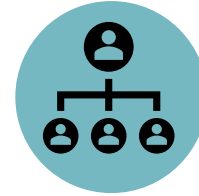
- Findings are often used to identify common strengths, challenges and priorities across authorities.
- Outputs frequently inform wider regional improvement and sector-led support activity.

Key differences



Scale of participation

- The number of local authorities involved varies considerably, ranging from around 10 to 33.
- This affects both the logistics and design of the sessions.



Attendance model

- Participation varies from DCSs and senior leaders only to broader attendance involving assistant directors, consultants, peer reviewers and wider regional networks.



Frequency of activity

- Whilst annual delivery is the most common approach, some regions operate bi-annual models, separate SEND and CSC cycles, or align activity with existing assurance frameworks.



Approach to challenge

- Some regions emphasise supportive professional dialogue and learning.
- Others express a desire for greater rigour, scrutiny and more inspection-style challenge.



Format and structure

- Some regions use highly structured formats with facilitators, observers, timed presentations and standard templates.
- Others favour more flexible, discussion-led approaches.



Preparation requirements

- The volume and type of pre-work differs significantly between regions, from relatively light-touch submissions to detailed self-assessments, data packs and written evidence.
- Several regions noted the need to balance preparation burden with the value gained from the process.

Comparison table – 1 of 4

Component	South East	North East Contact: Abigail Holder	Eastern Contact: Rachel Black	West Midlands Contact: Sandeep Virk	South West Contact: Vicky Rasey	East Midlands Contact: Khalid Mahmood	London Contact: Ben Byrne	North West Contact: Paul Bunker	Yorkshire & Humberside Contact: Kate Gilllan
Number of LA's	19	12	11	14	15	10	33	24	15
Frequency	Annual	Annual	SEND annual, CSC bi-annual	Annual	Annual	Bi-annual – one year SEND, one-year Social Care	See footnote*	Annual, aligned to Ofsted CSC Annual Conversation	Annual
In person?	Yes, full day	x2 half day sessions – one for SEND, one for social care	Teams peer challenge In person day to discuss themes and regional priorities	Encouraged to be in person for peer challenge In person day to discuss themes	In person - full day Sometimes do a pre-network event evening before – building relationships	X1 full day in person		Yes, online by exception e.g. reschedule due to inspection	Yes, half day
Attendees	DCS and Senior Leadership Team	DCS and Senior Leadership Team	DCS and Senior Leadership Team	DCS and Senior Leadership Team	DCS, AD's and the AD's wider network by invitation of the DCS	DCS, AD's – usually 4 attendees per LA		DCSs in all cases, other attendees (usually AD-level with agreement within triad)	Each LA has 5 spaces with a min of 3 core attendees

**London has moved away from formal peer challenge and review arrangements, as the process was considered resource-intensive and did not deliver sufficient value relative to the time and effort required to coordinate and undertake the reviews (assessed and evidenced through evaluation undertaken with senior stakeholders and approved by ALDCS). Alternative mechanisms now in place include:*

- **Practice Spotlight:** A strengths-based approach designed to identify, celebrate, and share effective and developing practice across the region. To date ~150 examples of practice have been shared by local authorities and multi-agency partners. In 2026 this initiative has been aligned to the CSC and SEND reforms to strengthen shared learning through change. A new inclusion category has also been added with 32 submissions from schools.*
- **Diagnostic, peer review, and accountability activities** focused across the spectrum of SEND and Children's Social Care (CSC) delivery, providing targeted opportunities for challenge, learning, and improvement aligned to ALDCS priority areas and the reforms. Communities of Practice have been implemented in key areas to underpin and augment activities.*

Comparison table – 2 of 4

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Number of LAs per peer challenge	3 – 4 LA's per Peer Network	3 LA's per Peer Network	2 LAs per peer challenge	2 LAs per peer challenge	Always aim for 3 LAs. 2 is better than 4. Not randomly grouped – mix of Ofsted gradings, choice and considerations of statistical neighbours where possible	3 LA's per peer challenge	See footnote on page 5	3 LA's per peer challenge	2 per peer challenge
Pre-work	- Submit self assessment - Review other LA's self assessment, data pack	Regional template – social care aligned with National Framework and this year SEND will use the maturity matrix	Share SEF and real other LA's SEF	Gather SEF, audits, data and share with other LA	LA's send Self Assessment and relevant data, and regional resource pulls together using AI	Expert consultant will meet with the DCS and review the SEF and establish key lines of enquiry		Innovation & Improvement Questionnaire – categorising all areas of service delivery as a strength, improving or priority Self-assessment review (SAR) prior to challenge, provides feedback on documentation/ agrees agenda	Submit SEF Short presentation slide for each LA to complete in advance

Comparison table – 3 of 4

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Format on the day	• Submit self assessment which must be read in advance • 15 min presentation – where at, strengths, working on • 40 mins questions / clarifications • Back to presenters – 3 things they want feedback on • Other 2-3 LAs ponder on questions, lead LA stays quiet • 5 mins at end – what we got from what we heard	• Regional template is populated by each LA • Template is uploaded onto SharePoint site for all LA's to read in advance • On the day – attendees split into tables so each LA is represented on a table • Take in turns to rotate through 3 roles: presenter, lead explorer, observer. Note taker on each table to capture discussions • Some time dedicated at the end to reflect where they feel there would be most added value from regional focus – to inform regional priorities	• Face to face review and agree priorities for the region	• Offer the teams a template to complete and will continue to do so as it makes it easier to pull together and analyse information consistently • There is accompanying guidance LA's are expected to follow, which is helpful for those new into the role or process • Leaders then present their findings at the Senior Leadership Day. This is usually in form of a presentation, alongside written report which they provide following the challenge	Timed. 1.15 min slots. Someone who is presenting, challenging, observer/moderator (notes). 15 mins to present, 30 mins questions, 45 mins to feedback. BREAK. Rotate through roles. Observer makes notes in form, and can write down feedback – give it back to central team. Used to have a facilitator from the central team but found the conversation flowed better without us there Report then pulled together of key themes across all peer challenge sessions, which are presented back to the DCS group in person, and helps feed into the regional priorities	• Group is split into 3 • 1.5 hour blocks • During the 1.5 hours, one person is in the 'hot seat', one is in the observer role and one is in the supporter role • The person in the hot seat captures their own notes • Roles are then rotated • One consultant leads on pulling together a report of key themes across all peer challenge sessions, which are presented back to the DCS group in person, and helps feed into the regional priorities	See footnote on page 5	Individual LA structured challenge discussion (timed agenda), based on areas of focused agreed at SAR	1hr 15 mins per LA 5 mins – context setting 10 mins – talking through prepared slide 45 mins – open discussion 15 mins – action planning

Comparison table – 4 of 4

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Like	Full day Connection with others Honest space, confidential Hearing from others is inspiring Value seeing each others SEFs	Dedicated time to talk through things they find challenging, paperwork is kept to a minimum, and involvement of assistant directors helps to build and strengthen regional networks			Venue and time out, conversations, good write up	Appreciate the openness, collaboration and willingness of regional colleagues to support one another and share learning experiences	See footnote on page 5	Targeting (challenges based on individual LA priorities), reflective space with peers, constructive feedback, sharing of practice	Opportunity to connect and network, share practice and being away from laptops!
Improvements	Some have suggested a whole day is not needed Some felt the region should make greater use of the regional data set as a tool to guide peer challenge	Requests to hold sessions more frequently than annually			Large amount of data and information submission – this has been reduced by the use of a SA and region forming into common model rather than having a predesigned template			Some experience inequity (i.e. feel they offer more than they receive from peers), a notable minority note other LA self-assessments are too lengthy, some would prefer more 'critical' challenge/similarity to Ofsted scrutiny	More frequent sessions
Other notes						Numerous informal peer challenge mechanisms such as regular meetings, WhatsApp group which are very valuable		Reviewing the process to meet changes in the SOR	