

Children's Services Resources & Efficiency Peer Challenge Guidance Manual

April 2019

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1. Introduction

This guidance manual is designed to help build an understanding of the purpose and methodology of a Children's Services Resources & Efficiency Peer Challenge. It is not intended to be prescriptive as each challenge will have its own individual features but the steps set out in the manual provide a firm base for ensuring that each peer challenge can be conducted successfully.

The Children's Services Resources & Efficiency Peer Challenge has been designed to determine potential opportunities to control and reduce costs, ensure efficiencies and maximise positive outcomes in children's services, including the identification of invest to save opportunities.

It is recognised nationally that the context for delivering services for children is significantly challenging with most councils experiencing rising demand for services, increasing complexity of this demand and reducing resources to deliver. It is estimated that the funding gap in children's services will be £3.1 billion by 2025. This challenge is further compounded by uncertainty across local government which is prohibiting the ability of Councils to plan effectively. However councils also recognise there is scope and potential to be more effective in how they deliver services, and that is what this peer challenge is about.

While each peer challenge has common themes, they are tailored to the individual needs of a council and its partners, and the specific focus will be jointly agreed with the Chief Executive and the Director of Children's Services (DCS).

It is important to remember that a peer challenge is not an inspection and should not be conducted like one by either the peer team or the host council. It provides a critical friend approach that assesses the strengths of the council and their partners and identifies areas for improvement. The key purpose of the peer challenge is to stimulate local action about how the council and its partners can improve the impact of services and outcomes for children and young people. LGA Peer Challenges are complementary to the sector led peer challenge arrangements in each region.

The peer challenge is an interactive exercise. During the peer challenge the peer team will evaluate evidence from a number of sources and these could include:

- Introductory presentation by the local authority to provide context
- Position statement relating to the agreed key lines of enquiry
- A range of key documents that will be agreed in advance, but will include the Council Plan, Children's Plan, MTFs, Sufficiency Strategy and key performance/QA information
- An analysis of publicly available financial data
- Interviews and focus groups with elected members and staff from the council, partners, commissioned services and other stakeholders (as applicable to the lines of enquiry)

The peer challenge will conclude with a presentation by the peer challenge team. This will provide the team's views on the strengths, areas for further consideration and potential opportunities that have been identified. A feedback report covering the main points of the peer challenge will then be sent to the host council.

The Local Government Association (LGA) Principal Adviser and Children's Improvement Adviser (CIA) will discuss with the council any corporate implications of the peer challenge.

The LGA will use the learning from peer challenges to contribute to the developing body of good practice to be used by councils in their own improvement journeys. The peer team will actively seek out at least one case study from each peer challenge, which will be highlighted in the presentation and report.

2. The peer challenge themes

The peer challenge has been framed around four key themes:

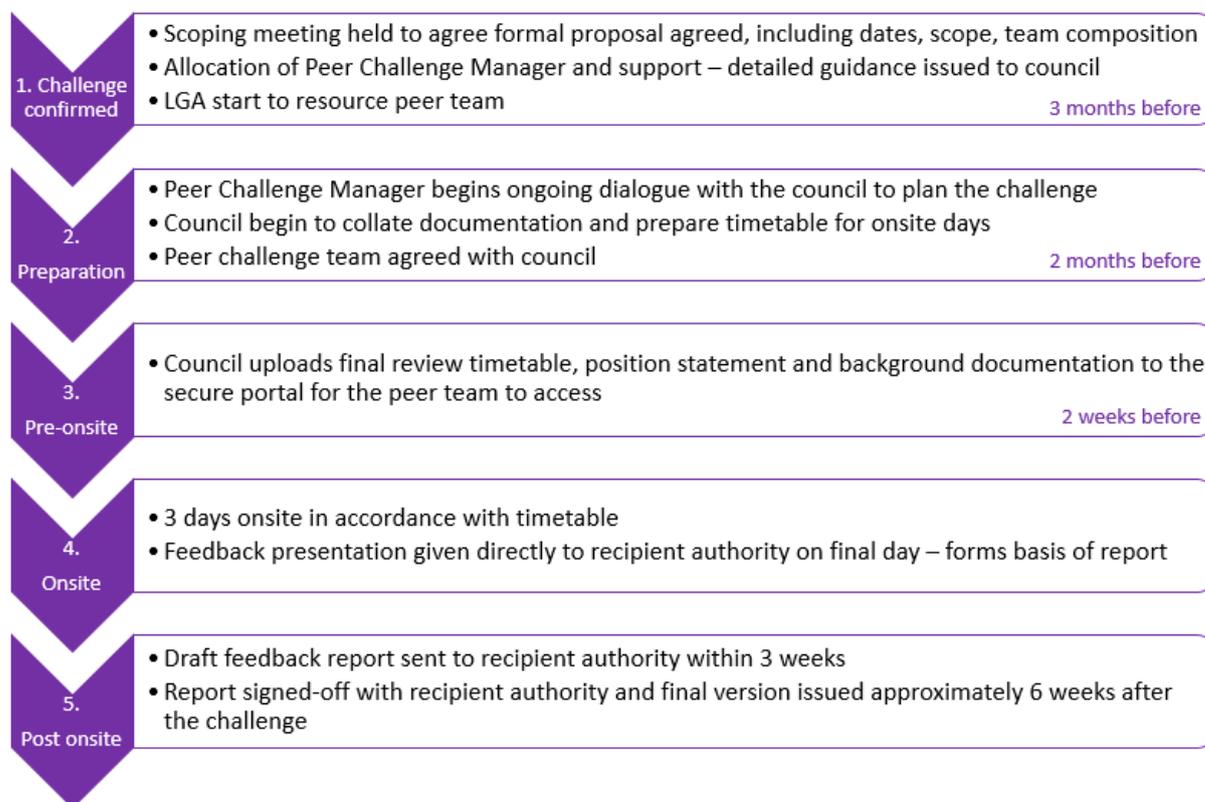
- Culture and practice
- Workforce
- Placements and commissioning
- Link to financial strategy

Within the context of the above themes, a number of key lines of enquiry will be identified as part of the scoping process between the local authority and the LGA Programme Manager. This meeting should include the Chief Executive (or Section 151 Officer) and the DCS.

It is critical for peer challenges to be tightly focused and targeted to deliver within the timeline and so the scoping meeting is critical in ensuring that the peer challenge has a clear focus.

Further information on the example lines of enquiry for each of the themes can be accessed [here](#).

3. Peer challenge stages



4. The peer challenge team

A typical team for this type of peer challenge is as follows:

Team member	Number of days involvement
• A director of children’s services (team leader)	3 days onsite + 2 off-site day (1 day pre-reading, 1 day post challenge reviewing and editing final report)
• An experienced AD of children’s social care	3 days onsite + 1 day pre-reading
• A children’s finance officer	3 days onsite + 1 day pre-reading
• A corporate finance expert (eg s151 officer)	3 days onsite + 1 day pre-reading
• An experienced commissioner	3 days onsite + 1 day pre-reading
• A senior corporate officer with a resources background	3 days onsite + 1 day pre-reading
• A peer challenge manager	3 days onsite + 4 offsite (preparation and writing report)

This would be a ‘standard team’. In practice it may be necessary to add additional team members depending on the areas to be explored, local circumstance and partnership arrangements.

In addition, an LGA project co-ordinator will be appointed to assist with logistical arrangements, payment of expenses etc. They will not normally attend the on- site work.

There may also be occasions when, for the purposes of gaining first-hand experience of a peer challenge, LGA may request the permission of a council for another LGA member of staff or prospective peer to participate.

Members of the peer team will be issued a peer team briefing once the team is agreed, which sets out timelines, and provides links to other key information such as roles and responsibilities, ground rules and data protection.

5. The council responsibilities

The host council will need to identify a peer challenge sponsor and an organiser for the peer challenge.

This challenge should be jointly commissioned by two **peer challenge sponsors** – the Chief Executive and the DCS or Director of People (or equivalent). The role of the sponsors is to ensure there is high level commitment to the process from staff and partners and to agree the scope and themes for the peer challenge with the LGA. The sponsors will ensure that the facilities and organisation required are in place.

The role of the council **peer challenge organiser** is to be the ‘single point of contact’, to put in place all logistical detail, prepare the draft timetable, supply the required documents and be available during the on-site stage for requests from the team.

6. Confidentiality, data protection and personal data

The Peer Challenge Manager will issue all members of the peer team with a Peer Team Briefing in advance of the peer challenge, which provides more detail on the expectations around confidentiality and data protection. More information is on the LGA website: [Information for Peers](#) which includes [Terms & Conditions](#) and the [Peer Charter](#).

The Council may also request that the peer team sign a confidentiality agreement as they will have access to sensitive information and potentially child level data.

Communications and publicity

The purpose of a peer challenge is to promote learning and improved outcomes. In that context, the council should consider communications regarding the peer challenge and its findings as early as possible.

Although the final letter is the property of the receiving council and is not published by the LGA, its purpose is to enable improvement and learning. The council will want to consider where and when the outcome of the peer challenge will be discussed. If the final letter is to be reported to the council executive, a scrutiny

committee or a NHS body, it will become a public document. There may be local media interest but pro-active PR is not recommended.

It is also likely that at a subsequent inspection, Ofsted will request a copy of the LGA Peer Challenge report.

There is a standard 'What's it all about' guide that the peer challenge manager will supply to the council and partners to act as a basis for communications with staff.

The final report will be sent to the Chief Executive and DCS.

7. Set-up and scoping stage

The LGA Programme Manager will arrange a scoping meeting with the review sponsors and other relevant staff as determined by the local authority.

The purpose of the meeting will be to confirm that a peer challenge is appropriate, consider the focus, additional key lines of enquiry, the timetable, peer team requirements and any necessary background information.

A formal scoping proposal will then be sent by the LGA Programme Manager to the council confirming the discussion and proposed arrangements for the peer challenge.

8. Peer challenge preparation

During this stage the council and Peer Challenge Manager must liaise closely and ensure that the following are prepared and supplied to the peer team in line with the agreed timescales:

- [Advance documentation](#) and performance information - a range of pre-reading material will be provided by the local authority based on an established list, and linked to the key lines of enquiry. This should be provided approximately two weeks before the peer challenge to give the peer team time sufficient time to read through and identify areas for discussion.
- On-site peer challenge timetable – work should begin on this as soon as the peer challenge is agreed to ensure maximum availability of people involved. The Peer Challenge Manager will provide the [template](#) and [guidance](#) and work with the Review Organiser to do this.

In addition to the information provided by the local authority, the LGA will arrange for an independent financial expert to provide a written analysis of published financial data in relation to the local authority. This will be made available to the peer team approximately two weeks before the on-site phase.

More detailed information about the preparation for the peer challenge will be included in the Scoping Proposal, sent to the council once the peer challenge is agreed.

9. On-site phase

The sub-sections below go through the key stages of the overall on-site stage. This is the centre piece of the whole peer challenge process and is heavily dependent upon the preparation having been completed. It is a demanding experience for both the peer team and the host council and requires considerable joint working and goodwill to ensure its success. It is a joint process and should be approached as one – including the ‘no surprises’ policy outlined below.

9.1 No surprises policy

A ‘no surprises’ policy should be adopted throughout the peer challenge. This means the council should be provided with regular feedback on the key issues emerging during the on-site work.

The Team Leader and Peer Challenge Manager will meet daily with the peer challenge sponsors to ensure there is a shared understanding of what will be presented at the final presentation. This gives the chance to resolve any outstanding issues and ensure appropriate language and wording is used. However, it is the independent peer team’s presentation and they should present what they have found (both strengths and areas for further consideration) in an open, easy to understand and constructive manner, albeit in a manner that is sensitive to the council’s situation.

Where the host council is in intervention, there are additional considerations to be made which are covered in the [Additional guidance for councils in intervention guidance note](#).

9.2 Council overview presentation/Initial Meeting

Day 1 will start with a meeting between the peer team, the council and any partner representatives, during which the council may wish to present a short overview presentation which should last no more than 20 minutes.

The remainder of the discussion should then focus on any final fine tuning of scope and focus and any recent developments for the Council or its partners that the peer team need to be aware of. The intention is to start a dialogue between the council that will continue throughout the on-site phase.

It is for the Council and its partners to decide who to have at this meeting but would typically include:

- chief executive
- lead member for children's services
- director of children’s services
- section 151 officer
- relevant assistant directors/heads of service
- any partner agencies the authority considers appropriate

9.3 On-site interviews and focus groups

This will form the main activity for the on-site phase. The focus of the peer challenge will be on validation and exploration of the lines of enquiry formed from the case reviews, focus groups, workshops and the advance documentation.

9.4 Feedback Meeting

The final phase of the on-site stage will be a feedback presentation by the peer team, led by the lead peer, to the council and its partners. This will follow an agreed LGA format, covering strengths and areas for consideration.

The presentation should identify any good practice that the team think should be shared.

10. The written feedback

Following the on-site stage, the peer team will compile a report based on the peer challenge findings comprising:

- an executive summary of the key findings
- areas that have been identified as key strengths
- areas that have been identified as opportunities or areas for further development
- recommendations for implementing service/practice improvement
- good practice

The peer challenge report will not provide a judgement and is not intended to make extensive recommendations.

The Peer Challenge Manager will prepare a draft of the report and, once agreed with the team and the lead peer, this will then be quality assured by the LGA Programme Manager (Children's Services), the relevant local Principal Adviser and Children's Improvement Advisor.

A draft report is then issued to the Council by the LGA Peer Challenge Manager. After a short period of time to allow for factual accuracy discussions, a final version of the report will be issued to the Chief Executive and DCS by the LGA Programme Manager.

11. Post-challenge evaluation

The views of the receiving council are secured through a telephone interview with the DCS undertaken by LGA approximately one month after completion of the peer challenge.

Evaluation questionnaires are sent to the peer challenge team by the project co-ordinator after the final letter is issued to the council.

Peer challenge managers will also be asked to provide feedback to the Children's Programme Team.

Following the peer challenge and production of the final report, the LGA Programme Manager will liaise with the council to agree any next steps and follow up activity. This could include collation and recording of good practice for sharing across the sector or the LGA Children's Improvement Advisor to broker specific support to develop and deliver improvement.



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