

Workshop on the future of sector-led improvement: Summary

Thursday 2 February 2017

Introduction

On Thursday, 2 February 2017, senior children's services leaders from across the North-West came together for a workshop to discuss the future of sector-led improvement in the region. The workshop was supported by the North-West Children's Sector-Led Improvement Team, and the session was opened by David Parr, Chief Executive of Halton Council and Chair of the Sector-Led Improvement Board.

The workshop focused on two key questions.

1. What is working well and what are the challenges in the current approach to sector-led improvement?
2. What is needed to maximise its effectiveness and how can this be put into effect?

We explored these questions through a structured, action-focused discussion, facilitated by Ben Bryant from Isos Partnership. This short note captures a summary of the discussion and the actions that colleagues agreed to take forward.

Question 1: What is working well and what are the challenges in the current approach to sector-led improvement?

Current context: Strengths and challenges

We had a good, constructive and reflective discussion of the strengths of the current approach and the challenges facing the region. Overall, colleagues considered that there was:

- a strong commitment to working collaboratively and a good collegiate spirit among leaders within the region, but a question about whether the burden of the work was shared equitably or fell disproportionately on some “willing horses”; and a concern that capacity to deliver by best practitioners/peers is challenged given the pressures in their own LA.
- a well-developed framework for sector-led support and peer challenge, but questions about whether this was yet being applied as rigorously as it needed to be and about whether the best use was being made of data and intelligence to get under the skin of the issues; and
- considerable expertise, knowledge and skills around supporting improvement within each local area, but a question about whether the offer of support for local areas at different stages of their improvement journey was sufficiently well developed and clearly defined, also concern that there is insufficient use of best practice from outside the North West.

As a prompt to the discussion, we considered the characteristics of a self-improving system and to what extent these were in place and strongly embedded in the North-West with regard to children's services improvement. Specifically, eight characteristics were suggested based on the LGA/Isos action research – these are set out in the table below. Colleagues were asked to consider whether each characteristic was very strongly embedded, quite strongly embedded, not strongly embedded, or absent from the region. The table below captures colleagues' views in the form of RAG (red-amber-green) ratings – for example, where responses given were largely ‘quite strongly’, the RAG rating is given as amber-green, and where responses given were largely ‘not strongly’, the RAG rating is given as amber-red. We have captured responses as RAG-ratings in case colleagues wish to return to this in future discussions and test how the approach to sector-led improvement is developing.

	Characteristic	RAG	Notes
1	<i>Networks for leaders and professionals to share and develop practice (and not become isolated)</i>	Green	Strong networks across the region, with good attendance and willingness to share practice.
2	<i>Forum for leaders to identify strategic challenges and shape the region's priorities</i>	Yellow	Regular strategic meetings and workshops allowed elected members and senior leaders to come together to explore strategic challenges and shape regional priorities.
3	<i>Mechanisms for learning from the best practice across the country</i>	Red	This happens, but in an ad hoc fashion – there is not a systematic way of drawing together intelligence about best practice nationally and sharing this so that all colleagues benefited.
4	<i>Collective commitment and a systematic approach to robust peer review</i>	Green	The commitment and systematic approach is in place, but the challenge was not yet as rigorous as it needs to be – it needed to be stronger at getting under the skin of issues.
5	<i>The ability to identify issues early and accurately, before they reach crisis-point</i>	Green	Similarly, the processes and routines exist to collate data (although there is the need to ensure all DCSs see this quickly), but data and intelligence need to be used systematically to identify issues.
6	<i>The ability to respond swiftly when concerns are identified, to land tough messages, and ensure remedial action is taken quickly</i>	Red	The “so what?” question – colleagues felt the region’s approach was strong at identifying issues, but less so at ensuring these led to concrete action. Are local areas sufficiently receptive to feedback?
7	<i>The right offer to support for councils at each stage of their improvement journey</i>	Red	There is support across the region, but it depends somewhat on personal networks. A more clearly defined, flexible offer of support would help colleagues to access the support that they need.
8	<i>The right capacity within the region to provide the right improvement support when it is needed</i>	Red	Peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring is important, but capacity is needed to get alongside staff (e.g. team managers). Is the best use made of other staff (members, ADs) in providing support?

Question 2: What is needed to maximise its effectiveness and how can this be put into effect?

Priorities for strengthening the North-West’s approach to sector-led improvement

From the consideration of the characteristics of a self-improving system that were becoming strongly embedded in the North-West and those they were not so, we identified three priority areas where colleagues considered that action was required to strengthen and maximise the impact of the region’s approach to sector-led improvement. These were:

- ensuring that there is a well-defined offer of support, capable of being tailored to a local area’s context, areas for development, and stage their improvement journey, with the right capacity to deliver this;
- effective triangulation of data and intelligence to inform robust conversations, rigorous challenge, and rapid action to drive improvement; and
- a systematic means of sharing best practice and intelligence from across the county so that it can be used to inform practice in local areas.

The table below captures the actions colleagues identified and some specific, concrete next steps for taking these actions forward.

Priority	What action is needed?	Who should be involved?	Concrete next steps
Priority 1: Well-defined offer of support	Formalise the offer of support – start by capturing what is currently available across the region in the form of a short “menu” of support for key players involved in children’s services improvement. This should set out concisely the response to the question ‘ <i>What support is available to me as a Lead Member / Chief Executive / DCS / Assistant Director in the North-West?</i> ’.	SLI Board, working with NWADCS and the NW Chief Executives’ network.	Pull together and test the menu of current support – develop based on feedback. Revisit other similar tools – e.g. checklist for Chief Executives.

	<p>Share the offer widely – ensure the menu of support is publicised widely through relevant professional networks.</p> <p>Instigate rapid feedback loops – at strategic discussions, gather feedback and case studies about approaches that have worked and been effective. At the same time, gather feedback on gaps in the current offer of support, and consider how these could be filled from within or beyond the region.</p>		
Priority 2: Effective use of data and intelligence to drive robust, swift action	<p>Tailor the peer challenge process – colleagues considered that this was currently too generic, and needed to have greater scope to focus on specific areas of concern (informed by the data and local intelligence).</p> <p>Build into the peer challenge scope to pick up matters that are “not on our schedule” – avoid the risk that the peer challenge process becomes limited by its own framework, and ensure it can continue to pick up any emerging issues or cross-cutting themes across the region.</p> <p>Revisit the self-view – colleagues considered that local areas receiving peer challenge could helpfully add their own analysis to the data. This would be beneficial (a) for the local areas (to be in the routine of analysing the data) and (b) for those providing peer-to-peer challenge (avoids the basic questions, allows more in-depth focus, tests the depth and accuracy of a local area’s self-evaluation). Colleagues argued this self-evaluation and commentary could focus on (i) what does “good” look like specifically in our local area, (ii) what are the good things we would like to share, (iii) what are we worried about, (iv) what support are we looking for. This would help not only to sharpen the peer challenge process, but also shape the region’s priorities and aims.</p> <p>Should there be a categorisation process? – colleagues questioned whether analysis of the regional benchmarking data could result in a set of judgements about levels of support required. Colleagues noted the sensitivity around this, which was why something based on <i>levels of support required</i>, linked to the menu of local support, rather than a <i>summative judgement</i> on a local area, might be worth considering.</p>	SLI Board could hold the ring on analysis and following up action - determining who is best placed to have the conversation. Consider use of Assistant Directors (alongside DCSs) in the peer challenge process (developmental, builds capacity, succession-planning).	<p>Tailor peer challenge – SLI team to determine what this means in practice and test out early ideas.</p> <p>Revisit the self-view – SLI team to agree format for local areas to set out their analysis of the data in advance of a peer challenge visit, possibly using the four-point format colleagues suggested.</p> <p>Ensure timely access to data – SLI team to ensure all DCSs have swift access to the regional benchmarking data.</p> <p>Peer challenge – colleagues providing challenge to commit to focusing less on context and more on asking the challenging questions.</p>
Priority 3: Sharing best practice systematically	<p>Ensure you are maximising the value of existing networks – there was a strong view that the region has the right networks, but needs a more systematic process for sharing the learning and intelligence from these networks. These include sharing the learning from the best practice networks across the region, getting-to-good events, involvement in national networks. This also includes regional membership of Research in Practice (although ensuring the right balance between what individual local areas need with what could be done collectively).</p> <p>This could start with a set of routines for sharing key learning and signposting to effective practice – it could then develop into some smaller project-based groups</p>	Existing networks.	<p>Formalise the process through which intelligence from existing networks are shared – to be agreed who will lead on and coordinate each of these networks.</p>

	<p>to move from hearing about effective practice to adapting and embedding new ideas in practice locally. Regular items to share themes that emerge from the peer challenge process should be scheduled.</p> <p>Continue to avoid stigma and isolation – continue to recognise that innovative practice exists in all local areas, including (especially?) those in intervention. Continue to engage all colleagues in regional networks, and avoid the risk of isolation. Access best practice from outside the North West.</p>		
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Colleagues highlighted two potential barriers to putting these actions into effect.

1. **Capacity** – colleagues recognised the perennial issue around competing priorities and the difficulty freeing up capacity to contribute to regional improvement activities. Addressing this will require, first, consistent expectations of the support colleagues can access, but also their contribution to supporting others – this could be part of the “menu” of support across the region. Second, this could provide an opportunity to involve Assistant Directors and other staff in providing support – colleagues recognised that while there was a role for peer-to-peer coaching between DCSs, other engagements were also needed to embed lasting improvements.
2. **“Teeth”** – another perennial issue that colleagues highlighted was what happens when a local area is not willing to receive or respond to the messages identified through a peer challenge process. Colleagues felt that the current approach, whereby the SLI Board considers who is best placed to have a tough conversation with another local area and how issues may be escalated within regional networks, was sensible. Colleagues may also, in the future, wish to consider how to formalise the escalation route through other, national partners – such as the Local Government Association or the Children’s Improvement Board – in instances where a local area is in difficulty but is not receptive to messages about how to respond.

Next steps

Overall, there was a strong desire to continue to support and participate in the region’s approach to sector-led improvement. It was agreed that the Sector-Led Improvement Board, supported by the Sector-Led Improvement Team, would take away the actions agreed at the workshop, work up the details, and test and refine these in consultation with DCS colleagues.

For our part, we were very grateful to have been invited to be part of the discussion. We wish you all the best in taking forward this ambitious agenda, and look forward to hearing about how this develops.

Isos Partnership

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