

# **Early Years (Speech, Language and Communication)**

## **Peer Challenge Guidance Manual For Mini 12 Month Follow Up**

## 1. Background

On 14 December 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) launched [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education](#). The plan sets an overarching ambition: no community left behind. A further four ambitions will cover the key life stages of people's education.

Ambition 1 is to close the word gap in the early years. Children with strong foundations will start school in a position to progress, but too many children still fall behind early, and it is hard to close the gaps that emerge. We need to tackle these development gaps at the earliest opportunity, particularly focussing on the key early language and literacy skills, so that all children can begin school ready to thrive.

During the pilot phase of the Early Years Peer Challenge Programme it was recommended that the challenges were followed up twelve months later by a mini peer challenge focusing on the key recommendations in the original report.

## 2. Introduction

This guidance manual is designed to help build an understanding of the purpose and methodology of an Early Years **follow up** 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 challenge can be conducted successfully.

***The aim of the follow up challenge is to help councils reflect on their learning and progress since the main challenge, celebrate achievements and identify areas that may require further consideration. The follow up challenges will also enable the LGA to evaluate the impact of the challenges.***

The manual contains guidance for everyone involved in the follow up peer challenge and specifically for the host council and the peer challenge team.

The follow up challenge is an interactive exercise. During this challenge the peer team will examine evidence from a number of sources. These will include:

- Introductory presentation by the local authority to give context of their journey over the last 12 months
- Documents that have been developed since the full challenge
- A self-assessment prepared by the council and their partners
- Performance data
- Interviews and focus groups conducted with staff from the council, partners and other stakeholders

The challenge will conclude with a short presentation by the challenge team. This will provide the team's views on the strengths of early years provision and areas for consideration. A short feedback report covering the main points of the challenge will then be sent to the host council.

### 3. How long does a challenge last?

The peer team will spend two days on-site with the council and its partners. This will be preceded by a short period of planning, organisation and preparation particularly for the council to produce a self-assessment, the challenge timetable and the documentation, evidence and information that will be requested. The LGA will provide support and guidance through this period.

The LGA expects to have a final report submitted to the council within five weeks of the on-site phase, and often much sooner than this.

### 4. The challenge themes

The follow up challenge will be structured around the recommendations of the previous challenge.

### 5. Basic stages in a challenge

The information in the table below sets out the basic stages in a challenge.

Stage	Time Period	Action
Set-up meeting and formal proposal, including the initial scope of the challenge	At least three months before date of challenge	Council confirms it wishes to have a follow up challenge. LGA Children's Programme Manager issues proposal including confirmation of any additional areas explored, dates for on-site work and team composition.
Allocation of challenge manager and support.	As soon as council confirms date for a challenge	LGA allocate challenge manager, project co-ordinator and issue guidance manual to council. Where possible the Challenge Manager will have undertaken the original challenge.
Self-Assessment	As soon as council confirms date for a challenge	Council may choose to repeat the Maturity Matrix exercise with key stakeholders
Identification of peer team	As soon as council confirms requirements	Some of the original peer team are approached for availability. Team will be selected based on the focus of the challenge.
Challenge preparation	At least two months before on-site challenge	Challenge manager begins ongoing dialogue with the council to plan and prepare the challenge.  The council and its partners start to collate documentation and prepare challenge timetable for on-site days.

Final challenge preparation	At least ten days before challenge.	Council shares the final challenge timetable, self- assessment and background documentation.  The self-assessment should be a brief (3-4 side) simple narrative which gives an overview of journey the area have been on over the last 12 months, and links to the supporting documents which have the fuller detail.  This is shared with the challenge team
On-site	On-site stage	Peer team work through the challenge timetable and produce final presentation.
Post challenge	Within three weeks of on-site stage ending	Challenge manager drafts feedback report, agrees draft with team.  Final report issued to councils within three weeks of the on-site stage ending.  Discussions held re further support. Evaluation of challenge undertaken.

## 6. The peer challenge team

The LGA will initially source peers from the original peer team. For a follow up challenge the team will be smaller and selected based on the areas of focus.

<b>Team members (will include a selection of the following)</b>	<b>Indicative number of days involvement</b>
A director or assistant director of children's services with significant early years' experience (team leader)	Four (two days on-site plus pre-reading and report contribution)
An operational manager/practitioner with experience of early years	Three (two days on site plus pre-reading and support with final letter),
A Health manager/practitioner with experience of early years at strategic and operational level	Three (two days on site plus pre-reading and support with final letter),
An education specialist with experience of early years in a range of educational settings	Three (two days on site plus pre-reading and support with final letter),
The challenge manager	Four days (two off site, two on site)

In addition a project co-ordinator will be appointed to assist with logistical arrangements, accommodation bookings, expenses payments etc but they will not attend the on-site work.

## **Agreeing the peer team**

The LGA will consult with the council to ensure they have the final decision on the team make-up. Where peers from the original challenge are not available, it may be necessary to bring in a new peer.

Where a team member withdraws at short notice the challenge manager will propose an alternative as soon as possible, taking into account that the availability of peers will be limited.

## **Document Distribution**

All the information provided by the council and its partners will be uploaded to a designated group on a secure shared portal. This can only be accessed by the team, the host authority and the project co-ordinator.

## **7. The council and their responsibilities**

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

The challenge sponsor should be a senior manager within the council (preferably the director or assistant director of children's services). The challenge needs to be agreed by the council's Chief Executive and Lead Member. The role of the challenge sponsor is to commission the challenge, ensure there is high level commitment to the process from staff and partners and agree the scope and themes for the challenge with the LGA.

The role of the council 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.

In addition, the council should be aware of its responsibilities in agreeing to and participating in the challenge process. [Key council responsibilities](#)

## **8. Confidentiality, data protection and personal data**

### **Confidentiality**

Each party (council, partners, LGA, EIF and peer challenge team) will keep all confidential information belonging to other parties disclosed or obtained as a result of the relationship of the parties through the peer challenge and will not use or disclose the same, save for the purposes of the proper performance of the peer challenge or with the prior written consent of the other party.

The obligations of confidentiality will not extend to any matter which the parties can show is in, or has become, part of the public domain other than as a result of a breach of the obligations of confidentiality or was in their written records prior to the date of the peer challenge; was independently disclosed to it by a third party; or is required to be disclosed under any applicable law, or by order of a court or governmental body or other competent authority.

As can be seen in the challenge stages there are parts of the challenge that may involve team members having access to personal data. **It is vital that the following principles are understood by the council, partners and members of the peer team and adhered to at all times.**

### **Data protection**

The council, partners, LGA, EIF and peer team members agree that data (including personal data) as defined in the Data Protection Act 1998, relating to the processing of the peer challenge, to the extent that it is reasonably necessary in connection with the peer challenge, may:

1. be collected and held (in hard copy and computer readable form) and processed by the peer challenge team and
2. may be disclosed or transferred:
  - a. to the peer challenge team members and/or
  - b. as otherwise required or permitted by law

## **9. Set-up and scoping stage**

The LGA Programme Manager will arrange a meeting or telephone call with the director, or assistant director of children's services, and they will act as the challenge sponsor.

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

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

### **Communications and publicity**

The final report is the property of the receiving council and is not published by the LGA, however it is expected that the council share the report with the appropriate networks and partners.

The final report will be sent to the director of children's services (DCS) and copied to the LGA Principal Adviser and Regional Children's Improvement Adviser

## **10. Challenge preparation**

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

[Pre-challenge documentation and performance](#) information

Self-assessment and Maturity Matrix if revisited

[On site challenge timetable](#)

[Timetable in Excel](#)

[Timetable Guidance](#)

[What's it all about](#)

## **11. On-site phase**

The key features of the on-site phase are described below:

### **No surprises policy**

This council will be provided with regular feedback on the key issues emerging during the on-site work. The team leader and challenge manager will also give the council's challenge sponsor a good 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. But this is not an opportunity to change the findings of the peer team.

### **First peer team meeting**

The peer team will have its first meeting on the evening before of the challenge starts on site. Challenge manager will facilitate this meeting and it will cover introductions, familiarity with the methodology, the conduct for interviews and any initial thoughts that can be drawn from the pre reading.

### **Council overview presentation**

The start of Day 1 should include a short presentation from the council. This should last for a maximum of 20 minutes and consist of an overview of early years provision in the area (not just early years services delivered by the council); areas of strength; areas for development and any planned key actions and priorities. It should include information on the journey the area has been on since the last challenge.

### **On-site interviews and focus groups**

This will form the main activity for the rest of day one and the morning of day two. The focus of the interviews will be on validation and exploration of the evidence from the self-assessment and documentation. This will lead to discussion of the interviewees understanding of strengths and areas for the development across the early years agenda and the progress made following the full challenge 12 months ago.

### **The feedback presentation**

The final phase of the on-site stage will be a feedback presentation by the peer team to the council.

There is a standard format to the feedback presentation and each member of the team will contribute to the drafting. The presentation should identify good practice and suggestions for improvement, as well as the practice examples that the team think would be of wider interest.

## **12. 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 issues
- strengths and areas for further development identified throughout the process
- recommendations based on the findings and which will help the council and their partners to improve early years provision for children and families.

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

## **13. Follow up activity**

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 might include:

- Participation in an 'end of wave' good practice learning / sharing event which brings together stakeholders from across sites involved in each wave of challenges.
- LGA Children's Improvement Advisor to provide to broker specific support to develop and deliver improvement plans