

Shared Intelligence

**Evaluation of the Local Government Association
Sector Led Improvement programme for
Children's Services**

Shared Intelligence

July 2020

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings of the evaluation, undertaken by Shared Intelligence, of the Children's Services Sector Led Improvement Programme delivered by the Local Government Association (LGA).

In recent years, councils have faced a number of challenges in delivering children's services, with demand on services rising whilst council budgets and resources have been reduced. The LGA receives funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to provide a suite of support offers, based on the principles of Sector Led Improvement (SLI) and to support councils to improvement. The support consists of three strands targeting councils at both political and leadership levels and includes: support for lead members; intensive support for, predominantly, local authorities who have received an Ofsted judgment of 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'; and Children's Services Peer Challenges.

Findings

In order to understand the specific impact the programme has had, this evaluation set out to answer three questions: **Has the programme achieved its objectives and has the programme supported service improvements? Does the programme represent good value for money? Is there a continuing need for the programme and is any change in focus needed?**

It involved conversations with Directors of Children's Services and lead political members across the country, delivery partners such as LGA Children's Improvement Advisors, Department for Education officers and existing LGA monitoring data. The majority of the fieldwork took place before COVID-19 impacted the country but it is clear that this will have a knock-on impact for how children's services are led and delivered in the future.

The overall conclusions identified that the support programme has had a significantly positive impact on improvements in council children's services. This impact has been demonstrated in a number of ways:

- **It provides a unique offer for councils at a political level:** The Children's Leadership Essentials courses provide unique and valuable opportunities for learning and networking which has had a positive impact on leadership; the trusting nature of the relationship that develops through peer mentoring enables learning and positive change; and Lead Member Regional Networks all play a valuable role in providing a safe space to share knowledge and best practice.
- **The relationships between Children's Improvement Advisors (CIA's) and councils are highly valued and are the foundation from which much positive change has been made:** This high quality relationship and the role the CIAs play in bringing the sector together, benefits councils and regions by sharing best practice, learning and information, and brokering relationships. Its impact transcends council-to-council, council-to-LGA, and council-to-wider sector relationships.

- The LGA Children's SLI offer is a well-rounded offer: The suite of support on offer reaches councils at political and officer level and addresses multiple levels of need. This ranges from support for a new lead member who is beginning to understand statutory duties and their leadership role to a detailed and bespoke support offer or Directors of Children's Services. It also supports collaboration at a regional level to make positive change and bring whole councils together on their improvement journey. These key factors are central in making the most impact and change.

Value for money

Through drawing on the existing SLI infrastructure, this programme has achieved significant **REACH**, providing sector led improvement support to 133 out of 152 councils over the past two years. This existing SLI infrastructure has also contributed to the programme's **SUSTAINABILITY**, through drawing on the skills and experience of officers within the sector to provide advice and guidance and share best practice with other councils, in the role of peer reviewers. Furthermore, the reputation of the work of the LGA itself, as being **'WITHIN THE SECTOR, FOR THE SECTOR'**, places the organisation as the deliverer of the support in a unique position, and one that encourages participation through trust and credibility.

The Reach of the LGA Offer:

Between April 2018 and March 2020...



...**62** peer challenges and follow-up visits took place in **52** different councils



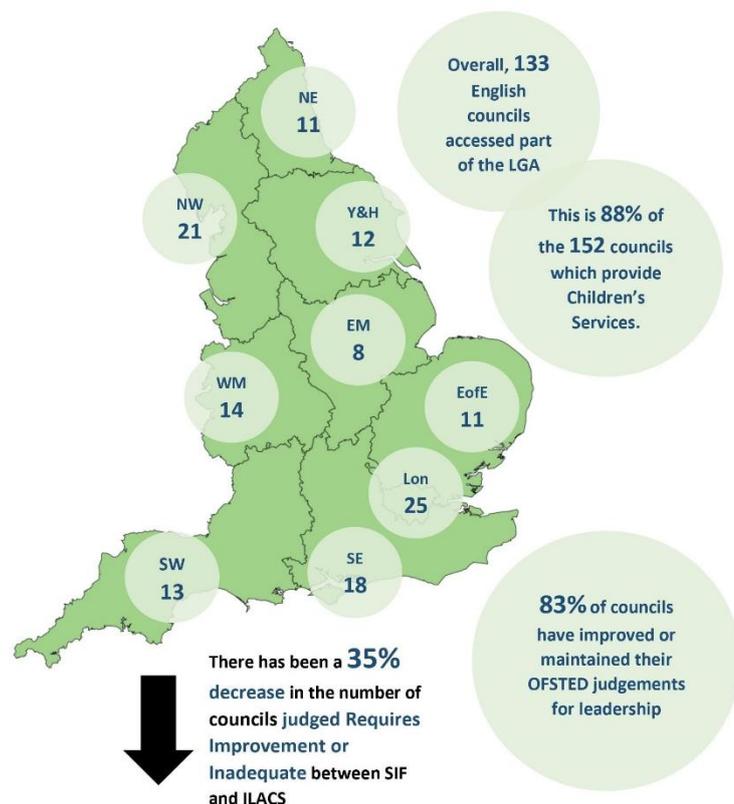
... over **120** members attended leadership essentials courses from **81** different councils



...members from **26** councils received peer mentoring



...the Children's Improvement Advisors spent time in **91** councils around England



*note that not all councils in a region have the statutory role of providing Children's Services.

Recommendations

The programme is unique in many ways: it is the only support offer to target political leadership in councils; the offer draws into the LGA's existing SLI infrastructure and experience which is unique in itself; lastly, the CIA role provides a unique combination of expertise, soft-intelligence, and impartial resource, with the ability to bring the sector together through building relationships. Furthermore, there is evidence of the positive impact that the Children's SLI offer has had, from enabling positive change at an individual level, to creating system change at council and regional levels. It is these factors that have led to unanimous support for continuation of the programme.

The following recommendations are made to build on the success of the programme and continue to meet the needs of the sector:

- **The future SLI children's service offer should be increasingly custom built and adapt quickly to the needs of the sector:** A shared challenge at this time is in addressing the increasing challenge of SEND provision, but the programme must continue to identify the challenges individual councils and the wider sector faces to ensure the programme meets the needs of councils and the sector.
- **Better use of data could support the coordination, targeting and promotion of the children's services SLI offer:** Including ensuring the whole council can benefit from intelligence gained through engagement with the LGA's wider corporate SLI offer, but to also improve awareness of the breadth of opportunities for support that currently exists.
- **A whole-council approach to improvement of children's services should be encouraged to ensure the greatest impact can be delivered:** The greatest impact from this support has been achieved when the whole council has supported the improvement journey; involvement of the council chief executive and political leaders in support activities should be strongly encouraged.
- **Support to lead members and potential lead members could extend further to deliver wider improvements:** Involvement of other key members (e.g. chair of children's scrutiny) could help to support a whole council approach to improvement. Furthermore, the programme needs to ensure it is meeting the needs of all lead political members, both those new in role and those who have been in role for many years.
- **A more structured offer could be developed to support lead members:** The needs of lead members could be met better through a more structured peer mentoring offer with a bigger pool of resources to draw from, as well as providing a structured, more formal opportunity for political members from across the country to meet. As well as this, a framework that can evaluate and measure the impact of the peer mentoring process should be developed.

Introduction

In 2018, the Local Government Association (LGA) received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver a two-year programme of support aimed at improving council children's services through targeting political and corporate leadership. Based on the principles of Sector Led Improvement (SLI), and utilising the LGA's already established framework for SLI, this children's services (CS) SLI programme was developed. The CS SLI programme consists of three support strands; support for lead members; intensive support for, predominantly, local authorities who have received an Ofsted judgment of 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'; and children's services peer challenges.

A core foundation of SLI is that improvement is a journey and that external support should create the conditions for improvement, helping the council concerned to build the capacity to perform well. The LGA's approach is based on the principle that peer processes, through harnessing the skills, expertise and experience that exist within the sector, can play a significant role in enabling long-term improvement.

In recent years, local authorities have faced significant and growing challenges in delivering children's services. The reductions in resources and budgets, alongside growing demands on children's services, has placed increasing pressures on councils and teams delivering services. Collectively, these pressures have resulted in some councils receiving 'inadequate' Ofsted judgments and the resulting impact on outcomes for vulnerable children.

The LGA is uniquely placed to deliver this SLI support offer as its existing organisational infrastructure provides the routes into councils at all levels. Furthermore, the organisational structure and the expertise of key LGA officers engaging directly with councils lends itself to flexibility in the approach to providing support.

Evaluating the children's services SLI programme

In October 2019, Shared Intelligence was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the children's services SLI programme. The focus of this evaluation has been to understand the impact the programme has had and the extent to which support has led to improvements in children's services; with specific identification of the parts of the offer that have led to positive impacts. The evaluation also set out to understand whether there should be a change in focus of the offer to help better address the issues and challenges councils are facing.

The evaluation framework consisted of three core research questions which are addressed throughout this report:

- 1. Has the programme achieved its objectives and supported service improvements?**
- 2. Does the programme represent good value for money?**
- 3. Is there a continuing need for the programme and is any change in focus needed?**

Other support for improving children's services

In considering the impact of the LGA's children's services SLI programme, it is important to note that there are other offers of support available to councils as well as interventions at a more formal level.

Therefore, in many cases, a council's improvement journey cannot be attributed to one support offer, but a package of support. For example, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) offers peer mentoring for Directors, while the Department for Education (DfE) have designated officers such as Regional Improvement and Support Leads (RISLs) and fund the Partners in Practice (PIP) programme. However, it is important to note that the LGA is currently the only organisation to provide improvement support at a political level.

Within this evaluation, effort has been made to ensure specificity as to where, how and why this LGA children's services SLI support offer has led to positive change within children's services, and what impact this has had in their improvement journeys.

Acknowledging the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

It is important to acknowledge that the fieldwork for this evaluation took place before the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic was known and prior to lockdown measures being implemented. Although this has meant that data collection methods were not particularly impacted, the implications of the pandemic are likely to bring about a new set of challenges to address in the future.

It is possible that the experiences and situations councils are dealing with at this time will have a knock-on impact for how children's services are led and delivered in the future. A current pause on inspection means that there is an even greater onus on the role of sector led improvement and assurance for the sector. This in turn may have implications for how councils have continued to deliver their services during lockdown and the extent to which contingency plans were developed and implemented to ensure those most vulnerable have continued to receive support.

The lack of local elections due to the virus is also likely to cause a knock-on effect in relation to the turnover of councillors. This may mean portfolio holders are in position for longer, therefore their needs may be different or there will be a requirement to deliver the offer in a new, socially distanced way.

The conclusions and recommendations presented in this report reflect a pre-COVID-19 world. As the country moves through the transition and recovery phases of this pandemic, the messages in this report may need further consideration in the context of the "new normal".

The following sections of this research report present:

- the methodology adopted in this evaluation;
- the key findings in the context of the three-core research questions;
- the recommendations for the LGA in further delivery of this programme; and
- a suggested action plan to implement the recommendations.

FIGURE 1: THE THREE STRANDS OF THE LGA'S CHILDREN'S SERVICES SLI PROGRAMME



Core methodology

This section presents the methodological approach taken in this evaluation. Effort was made to ensure that discussions were representative of all council types, geographies and parts of the support offer.

The approach involved:



Telephone in-depth interviews with:

- **Recipients of support** (DCSs and lead members in councils across England);
- Those **delivering and facilitating access to the support**, (CIAs and LGA Principle Advisors);
- Individuals who could provide an **external viewpoint** of the offer, including DfE Regional Improvement and Support Leads and a Chair of a Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance (RIIA); and
- A former lead in the delivery of Leadership Essentials.



Desk-based analysis:

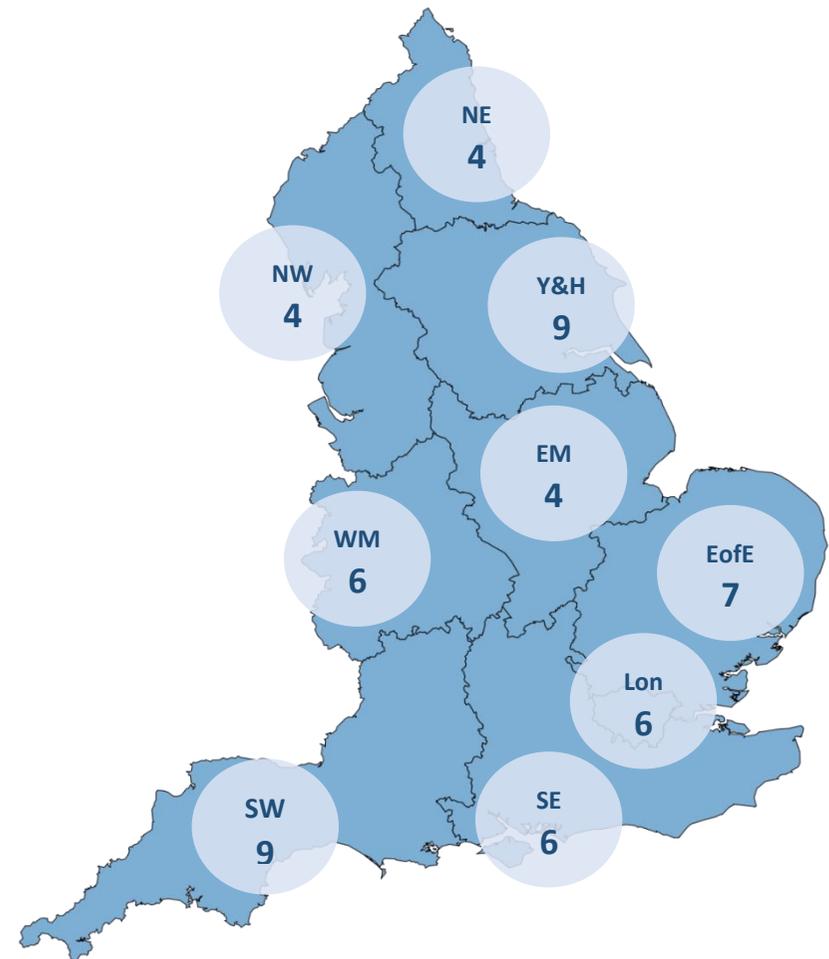
- Monitoring and evaluation documentation collected by the LGA.

Conversations were carried out with:

18 Directors and Assistant Directors of Children's Services

15 Lead Members

Across **9** Regions



Findings

Has the programme achieved its objectives and has the programme supported service improvements?

The evaluation has shown that the LGA children's services (CS) SLI programme is highly valued by the sector and the programme has had a catalytic effect on councils and their improvement journey. It is also significant as the CS SLI offer is the only support offer in the wider sector to target councils at a political level. This has been the consistent message given by those receiving the support, by those who have contributed to the improvement, and by those who are external to its direct delivery but are involved at a strategic level.

There are many specific examples of the support leading to positive changes at an individual, service-wide and council-wide level which have ultimately led to improvements in the running of children's services. This broadly extends to positive experiences in relationships, effective use of data collection and usage and sharing of best practice across councils and regions. In addition, there are clear examples of where this programme has improved leadership, particularly at an individual level. This is of significant importance as the support programme specifically sets out to improve leadership of those leading and delivering children's services.

Although the CS SLI programme as a whole has led to a variety of positive changes, specific elements of the offer are considered to be more influential in leading to improvements and are valued most highly as a result. The following section presents the impact the CS SLI offer has had on children's services and groups these into themes to demonstrate the effect on councils' improvement journeys.

A unique offer for councils at a political level

The offer has been built up over time, learning from years of experience and drawing on the expertise of members across the country. Through linking with the wider LGA SLI offer, the children's programme is also able to provide a range of support and development opportunities to members. The councillors accessing this support are often first-time portfolio holders, or if they have held a portfolio before, they have not had experience of children's services. Therefore, this SLI offer provides a valuable introduction to both the role of a portfolio holder, and to the specific roles and responsibilities of the children's services portfolio, including the statutory duties of lead members. Another unique factor of this support is that the SLI offer seeks to target the development of leadership skills. This coupled with the new knowledge of the service ensures lead members are more equipped to tackle the strategic challenges faced by their council.

"It has been really important that there has been recognition by the DfE that there should be money for training lead members and getting them together to share their experience, share their data..."

- Interview quote from a Chair of a Lead Member Regional Network

Many examples have been provided by lead members illustrating how partaking in Children's Leadership Essentials, being part of a Lead Member Regional Network, receiving peer mentoring, or receiving targeted support from a Children's Improvement Advisor (CIA), has led to positive changes and improvements. These outcomes ranged from changes on an individual level, such as increased knowledge and confidence in the role of lead member for children's services, to improvements in service delivery, such as better use of data to inform where resources are focussed. Furthermore, these examples were not only given by lead members, but also by people associated in the offer, for example DCSs and CIAs, triangulating the findings that the support targeted at a political level has led to improvements.

Children's Leadership Essentials has a positive impact on leadership due to the unique and valuable opportunities it provides in learning and networking

The nature of the Children's Leadership Essentials courses enables the LGA to achieve significant scale in delivering the support. Lead members and Chairs of Children's Scrutiny from across all political parties, as well as subject matter experts, from all over England are brought together in this two-day course. This opportunity does not exist currently outside of this SLI support offer.

Not only has monitoring data highlighted the consistently high satisfaction rate of Children's Leadership Essentials courses, but interviews carried out in this evaluation have highlighted the impact these courses have. Specifically, these Leadership Essentials courses provide unique opportunities that enable lead members to meet and develop relationships with other lead members and individuals they would not usually meet, gain insight and wider perspectives through cross-party discussions, and have direct access to experts within the sector.

As a result, it has been reported, not only by lead members themselves but by other individuals involved in the offer too, that participating in Leadership Essentials has influenced improvements in leadership. For example, the course enabled lead members to develop a greater understanding of: what the role of lead member for children's services means; what responsibilities they have (and don't have); the roles of officers within children's services and the issues the services face; and the importance of using, and how to use, data. Having this more comprehensive understanding has meant that lead members have been asking the right questions of DCS's, have enabled them to be more engaged in their role and the improvement agenda for the service, and has kept their role focused on the strategic nature of the role rather than getting involved in operations.

'A phenomenal session with lots of really practical tips from a great role model'

- Leadership Essentials feedback form member participant

Peer Mentoring enables learning and positive change, rooted in a trusted relationship

Peer Mentoring assignments have brought together mentors who are experienced lead members, both in terms of their political role as well as their own council's improvement journeys, with mentees who may either be new portfolio holders or might be facing specific challenges. This encourages a relationship between the two members built on trust and honesty. As a result of this, many mentees have grown in confidence in themselves and in performing their duties as lead member, with lead members understanding better what specific questions they need to ask their DCS's and what data they need to advise on strategic direction. Lead members have also reported how the support from a peer mentor has helped develop relationships between themselves, cabinet members and other councils officers such as the Chief Executive.

"It helped the member to grow in confidence. They can test things out with mentors. They gain the confidence to challenge, for example overview and scrutiny changes."

"When new into role they could hear from a peer what the role meant politically, they then knew what questions to ask. This was invaluable. Gaining tips and techniques, lead member to lead member."

- Interview quotes from two DCS's regarding their Lead Member's Mentoring, from councils in the West Midlands and the East of England

Lead Member Regional Networks are valued but there is more that they could do

Although the extent to which Lead Member Regional Networks (LMRN) are established varies across the country, there have been a number of positive messages received around the valuable role they play, bringing new information, sharing best practice and enabling a broader geographical perspective on regional matters. For example, LMRNs were seen as a space for lead members to explore sensitive issues within their councils with other lead members. Most importantly, these spaces were considered a safe, non-judgmental space where lead members could explore issues, share learning and best practice, and have existing approaches challenged constructively from a wider regional sector context. This has been particularly valuable as there are limited opportunities at a political level, within a region, for members to do this. It is also important to consider whether the impact of the current COVID-19 situation could have a positive impact on a lead member's ability to participate in these regional networks through the use of technology and virtual meetings. This could make it easier for lead members to take part in LMRN meetings, which could ultimately improve engagement with LMRN, promote more regional sharing, and ultimately the overall reach the LMRNs have.

However, some messages were heard around the potential that exists for lead member networks which the current structures don't yet allow for. For example, some interviewees mentioned that sessions usually involve discussion across many topics, and because groups are often large, timings don't allow the discussions to go into a specific topic in any great depth. To address this, suggestions were made around agendas taking a more theme-based approach to enable enough focused time on one topic. Another suggestion was around inviting external specialists to contribute to discussions on specific topics.

Case Study – Torbay

Positive experience of Peer Mentoring

The lead member for Torbay began her new role as both a lead member, and a portfolio holder for Children’s Services, in June 2019. At this time, Torbay’s most recent Ofsted inspection had rated the council as ‘inadequate’ and the council was in special measures.

The role of the mentor provided support to the mentee across a number of different areas, both those already identified as areas of focus by the mentee, but also any additional areas identified by the mentor himself throughout the process. In this assignment, the role of the mentor brought clarification to the role and responsibilities of being a lead member for children’s services, as well as what it meant to be a politician. The assignment also focussed on opening up channels of communication with officers within the council.

As a result, peer mentoring has enabled the mentee to develop her confidence in her leadership role and develop relationships with council officers. Through enforcing more structured communication channels between the mentee and council officers, there are now more regular contact points to discuss service performance. Furthermore, the mentee has become more confident in negotiating the needs of the council with cabinet members, and has also developed a more thorough understanding of where her role sits within the council and its significance not only for Children’s Services, but for other areas of the council too. Lastly, the role of the mentor enabled the mentee to develop much faster in the role as lead member in a much shorter time than without this mentoring relationship. Because of this, peer mentoring was recommended by the lead member, particularly for those who are new in role, as it is really important to get to grips with the role as soon as possible.

The relationships CIA’s develop and strengthen are at the centre of the bespoke support offer and are the foundations for which much positive change is made

A consistent message heard throughout all of the interviews was the value of the support and challenge offered by the Children’s Improvement Advisor (CIA) role. On balance, every group of interviewees, from lead members and DCS’s to LGA Principal Advisors (PA’s) talked about the importance of the CIA role and the relationship they have with the council’s improvement journey. More specifically, the positive changes that many councils reported have, in some way, been achieved due to the high-quality relationship that the CIA has with the councils in their region. What contributes to the development of this relationship are a number of unique qualities that the LGA CIAs possess.

All of the CIAs are former DCS’s and/or current DfE advisors. This experience of the role and of the sector brings credibility to their role and their support, which builds a relationship of trust. This relationship has been described by some councils as a ‘safe space’ in which councils can speak more openly about the issues and challenges they are facing. This is a key strength of the SLI offer and not experienced in other relationships, such as with representatives of the Department for Education.

“It’s a safe space. When you are a DCS, you are never sure where that is. It felt very helpful”

- Interview quote from a Council in the North West

The quality of this relationship means the CIA often has a clear understanding of the context in which children's services is being delivered in an area, highlighting what is going on behind the data. Where councils feel able to discuss sensitive issues, for example the nature of difficult relationships and cultures within councils leading to slow progress in improvements, the CIA provides insight to LGA colleagues and DfE counterparts sensitively, which helps identify need in an improvement journey and enables better targeted support. Leading on from this, there is much value in their experience and in their relationships with other councils, often built up through their previous experience as a DCS, with LGA colleagues, and with representatives of other sector support offers.

For many councils, the quality of the relationship and the activities CIAs have carried out to support them, such as offering challenge and external critique of existing approaches and providing insight to new DCSs on the context of the council, have led to improvements on an individual level. As this is delivered in a trusted space, the messages can be more impactful. For example, individuals within councils reported that working closely with the CIA has led to an increase in confidence in carrying out their roles, reassurance that the approaches they are taking are the right ones, and that for new DCSs working with a CIA has accelerated their learning and progression in their role.

“Without this support I would still be finding my way and trying to get in touch with colleagues and learn what they are doing”

- Interview quote from a Council in the West Midlands

Sharing best practice, learning and information

The relationships CIAs have with others have been significant in supporting their councils. For example, CIAs work closely with other LGA officers who have existing relationships with council Chief Executives and leaders. CIAs often link into Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances which involve a number of individuals at different levels of the councils in their region, as well as representatives from other bodies within the sector such as DfE and ADCS. Furthermore, CIA's also often maintain relationships with councils they have engaged with previously in their former DCS role. CIAs are therefore fully embedded in the sector and form a vital link that gathers and shares knowledge, learning and best practice, from within the region and beyond, for the benefit of councils.

In doing so, councils have benefitted from receiving wider perspectives in respect of their councils' challenges, alongside alternative approaches to try, and a sense that many other councils are going through a similar journey. The well-connected nature of the CIA has also been particularly valuable where some CIAs have been involved with, and have had an input into, Improvement Boards, by providing intelligence, external insight, expertise, and challenge to support a council's improvement journey.

Brokering relationships

CIA's have supported the improvement journey by brokering relationships, with individuals in the same council, and relationships between councils and other external contacts. CIA's have brought together lead members, DCS's and other officers to improve working relationships between those individuals and increase confidence in managing such relationships. The CIA role has opened councils up to the wider offer of the LGA, for example its lobbying power and political groups, and has also brokered and informed other support offers, for example the Partners in Practice offer. Coordination of this wider resource has meant that councils are able to receive a suite of wrap-around support that is specifically targeted to meet councils' needs. Lastly, the CIA's relationships with councils in their region, and the brokerage of relationships between these councils, has built and improved relationships between councils at a regional level. Historically, some councils within a region have struggled to work collectively. However, through, for example, tapping into existing networks and hosting regional workshops, collaborative working between councils in some regions has improved significantly. This has enabled a culture of sharing challenges and solutions and working together to bring investment into the region. A DCS in one region stated that the improvements that have been influenced by the CIA, which have led to greater regional working, have meant that councils have achieved more collectively than they ever would have individually.

Case Study – North East and West Midlands Improved collaboration between councils at a regional level

The West Midlands

Within the West Midlands, the CIA, working closely with the LGA PA, the DfE Regional Improvement Support Lead and the Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance, has focussed activity to improve collaborative working among councils within the region at both DCS and Chief Executive levels, as well as political levels. This work has included bi-annual events at Warwick University, supported by the LGA, where DCSs of the 14 LAs and three Chief Executives from the Trusts, have come together to collaborate and plan improvement and development work aligned to the agreed vision for the region. Further bi-annual events have also been organised and supported by the CIA to develop collaborative working between lead members and scrutiny chairs in the region, which include inputs from the DCS group on current priorities and progress made.

This activity focussed on improving collaboration and sharing learning across the region has led to a number of positive impacts. The events for DCSs have created a platform for the region to work collaboratively which has led to the development of more positive relationships and joint working processes. Furthermore, working more closely as a group has brought money into the region for improvement and innovation as joining resources and local leadership together as a region has placed councils in a stronger position than if they were to bid alone. Funding has included £1.5m from the Innovation Fund for workforce development; £1.9 m from the Migration Fund; funding from the DfE for a regional Safe Centre feasibility and design stage; funding from DfE £300k for the development of RIIA work and funding from the LGA to support the development of a regional commissioning hub.

In addition to this, bringing political members in the region together, and linking in the work being done by the DCS group, has raised awareness and developed understanding amongst political members of the local children's services context, the issues the region is trying to address, and the progress the sector is making. It has also enabled lead members to take back this learning into their own councils, to ask the right questions of their teams and to develop a better understanding of their children's services priorities.

This focussed work has therefore not only had a positive impact on the regional groups, at DCS and political member levels, but it has also had an impact in bringing the whole system together across the region for more strategic working.

The North East

Collaboration across the North East region has also improved as a result of the sector-led improvement offer. Historical siloed working, limited sharing of best practice and challenges reduced the region's ability to learn from each other and improve the overall service offer.

The CIA responsible for this region, working closely with the ADCS group and Chair of the Regional Improvement Alliance, have significantly improved collaborative working between councils, both at council officer and lead member levels. This work has put in place the infrastructure and processes to enable more collaboration, re-established the Lead Member Regional Network as well as four small networks of three councils working closely together to share information, good practice and support.

Through this targeted work, the region is now developing a culture of sharing experience and insight, and of regional responsibility through a more co-ordinated approach, reaching councils at officer, Chief Executive and political levels.

The LGA children's services SLI offer is a well-rounded offer

When viewing the CS SLI offer as a whole, it is clear the support offer has the potential to reach all levels where support may be required. The lead member strand provides strategic, high-level support through Leadership Essentials courses as well as localised, one-to-one support through peer mentoring assignments and bespoke CIA support. The council at a DCS level receives bespoke support through CIAs, and in addition, the LGA's PA's have close relationships with CEOs and leaders. Furthermore, the support has potential to reach these three levels of the councils through one support offer: Children's Services Peer Challenges.

This evaluation has highlighted that the greatest improvements are made when a whole-council approach is taken, when chief executives and leaders are engaged as well as DCS's and lead members, and when councils take advantage of the full offer. However, this only works when information is shared across all parts of the offer. The support provided could be better informed by wider improvement journey across the council. For example, information gained through a Corporate Peer Challenge could be beneficial to improving children's services, but also insight from a CIA could be useful in carrying out a Corporate Peer Challenge.

Lastly, what also contributes to the CS SLI offer being well-rounded is the fact that the learning gained through engaging with the support is not just one-way. The learning and best practice gained through the challenge process (peer mentoring and peer challenges in particular) is reciprocal between councils as well as through the LGA's national lobbying role. This message was consistent among those involved in delivering and receiving support. For example, some mentors talked about how the support had provided them with the opportunity to reflect on the practices within their own councils, revisiting priorities in their own councils that they may have lost focus or gained a new way of looking at a particular challenge. In addition, it was noted that Leadership Essentials courses are useful for those delivering content as well as participating. This was highlighted as the Leadership Essentials course is one of the few places where such a diverse group of lead members come together in one room.

"I have enjoyed my experience of being a mentor as it has reenergised me and given me time to reflect on what is happening in my own local authority... mentoring keeps me fresh after 20 years"

- Interview quote from a Mentor

'A very 'easy' learning atmosphere. Encouraged questions and discussions in a safe and supportive way especially given complexities of work (and personal experience and fears)'

- Leadership Essentials feedback form member participant (course number 21)

Case Study –Dudley & St Helens Borough Councils

Positive examples of a well-rounded offer

The two examples below demonstrate the impact of the well-rounded nature of the improvement offer, as well as the importance of drawing on an existing infrastructure based on relationships and networks, to ensure the right support reaches councils through the right channels at the right time

The CIA role is integral to facilitating improvements to council' children's services. Through close working with individuals at different levels within a council, including directors and assistant directors of children's services, Chief Executives, and lead members, and by drawing on their expertise of the sector, CIA's develop a strong understanding of their council's needs and how best their needs could be addressed. Through CIA's existing relationships with other LGA officers, such as PA's, other bodies within the sector, such as DfE, ACDS and Solace, and other councils, CIA's coordinate the support that would best suit the council, helping them to address their needs. It is this infrastructure built on a network of relationships, as well as specific intelligence from individual councils and the wider sector, that contribute to the well-rounded nature of this SLI offer.

Dudley Borough Council

Dudley is one council that has benefitted from the close working of the CIA with individuals at multiple levels of the council.

It has been mentioned already that new lead members will often have experience in areas such as scrutiny but being a portfolio holder for children's services brings with it a number of challenges. Particularly given the statutory responsibility that the lead member and DCS hold. Furthermore, the workings of a children's services department are not confined to the department itself, but require a holistic approach across the council, as the service needs to interact with many other departments, including housing, and health. It is, therefore, even more crucial for a lead member to understand their role and responsibilities as well as have access to the support that they need to carry out their role. This is where the role of the CIA is of particularly high value.

In developing an understanding of the needs of individuals within Dudley, through close working with both the DCS with and lead member, the CIA was able to facilitate the linking of the lead member with a peer mentor. This enabled the lead member to benefit from support and advice from someone in the same role and therefore someone who understood the statutory responsibilities of the position. As a result, the mentor and CIA were able to help the lead member see above the day to day tasks and see the strategic nature of the role, especially in the face of changes within the senior leadership team. This change in approach then enabled the lead member to work more closely with the DCS to provide an overarching vision for the Borough. Furthermore, the ongoing nature of the relationship between the CIA and council has meant that the CIA has been a constant in a period of great change within the council and has enabled the understanding and intelligence that the CIA provides to continue regardless.

The experience within Dudley council demonstrates the positive impact the support offer can achieve. Through the CIA's ability to reach the council at multiple levels, the CIA becomes a source of soft intelligence. This, combined with the CIA's role as co-ordinator of support and an impartial resource for officers and members, ensures the support can reach the council at points where it is most needed.

St Helens Borough Council

The experience within St Helens Council provides another example of positive impact through the well-rounded nature of the offer.

The support for the council came after a focussed Ofsted inspection gave the council three priority actions. This was followed up by an inspection which found the council to be inadequate overall with 'Requires Improvement' in two areas. Since then the CIA has worked closely with the LGA PA to ensure the support has reached the individuals within the council where it would be most beneficial, through close working with the DCS and other officers, as well as cabinet members. Specifically, the CIA has coordinated a range of LGA-led support offers, including a bespoke peer review focusing on the 'front door' of the service, Corporate Parenting training, as well as a session with the cabinet group led by the PA. The CIA has also coordinated wider sector support offers, including PIP through DfE, as well as linking the DCS with other councils who have been able to share best practice on specific aspects of the service.

Following this support, St Helens has made significant improvements in the performance of their children's services. The council has made progress against specific points mentioned in their latest Ofsted inspection, with Ofsted reporting that the 'front door' in particular was a real strength to the service. Furthermore, responsibility for improving the service is now felt throughout the council with the more prominent inclusion of children's services in the corporate plan demonstrating that a wider council approach to improvement is being taken.

The ability for the council to make these improvements was attributed to the excellent coordination of all improvement offers that have reached the council at multiple levels.

Does the programme represent good value for money?

In order to answer this part of the evaluation, it is worth considering how improvements in children's services are measured. One of the main aims of the programme was to support improvements in councils whose children's services were rated 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' by Ofsted, with the aim that by the end of the two-year funded programme, there would be fewer councils across the country with these ratings. Furthermore, the SLI programme's approach to achieving this objective was through targeting leadership within councils. It is important to note, as validated in the interviews, that being able to maintain a rating between one inspection and the next was almost as much of a success as improving a rating. This was because officers working in children's services have faced increasing challenges and pressures – demand for services has been increasing and councils' capacity is stretched to an unsustainable position.

An observation that is particularly important to note is the overall positive trend in improvements in Ofsted judgements between council's Single Inspection Framework (SIF) and Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) ratings. Comparing the ratings of these two judgements provides a useful timescale in which to monitor improvements as the ILACS replaced the SIF in January 2018. Included in the figures below are the numbers of councils who have maintained as well as those who have improved their ratings.

Of the 99 councils who had both a SIF and an ILACS rating, 81 per cent of councils made improvements or stayed the same in their Ofsted judgements for 'overall effectiveness' of their children's services,

with 83 per cent of councils improving or maintaining their judgement specifically in the ‘leadership’ area. Each of these councils had accessed some part of the LGA children’s service SLI offer, however, these improvements cannot be solely attributed to the CS SLI offer. Overall, the Ofsted judgements of these 99 councils has shown a 26 percent decrease in the number of ‘requires improvement to be good’ and ‘inadequate’ judgements for ‘overall effectiveness’ of councils’ children’s services, and a larger decrease of 34 per cent in ‘requires improvement’ and ‘inadequate’ judgements for the area of leadership specifically.

This is a very positive story for the sector in terms of the changes and improvements councils are making and the impact it is having on Ofsted judgements. Although these improvements in judgements are the impact of a collective effort from the wider sector in improving children’s services, including support offers that exist through other active bodies in the sector, this evaluation has gained insight into the specific ways that the CS SLI offer has led to improvements within councils. The LGA’s role has played a part in the sector’s improvement and the overall positive trajectory of improved judgements. Of particular note, is the positive story around improvements and maintenance of judgements in Leadership. The CS SLI programme is unique in that it targets this area specifically in councils, so it is even more likely that the programme has played a particularly influential role in improvements in this area.

When considering the opportunity cost, the risk of the programme not being delivered or not being delivered well could have a detrimental effect on the sector. According to the ISOS Partnership¹ report, costs for improving a council can range between £3 million and £15 million, with the average cost for improving a council’s children’s services being approximately £10 million. This is a significant financial amount which would leave many councils with a serious financial challenge.

In 2018/19, councils across England were forced to spend £770 million more on children's social care than they had budgeted for². This figure could have been far higher had it not been for the improvement support offer for the sector.

This value for money is further demonstrated:

1. The children’s services SLI offer has penetrated a significant amount of councils in the country. The fact that the LGA manages the wider SLI offer is also significant as it is able to support a whole council view of children’s services and the improvements needed with the sector. The programme itself has provided sector led improvement support to 133 of the 152 councils providing children’s services over the past two years. This represents 88 per cent of the councils delivering children’s services in England.
2. The LGA supports workforce development through teams of peer reviewers to spend time with other councils, drawing on their skills and expertise to provide ‘free’ advice and guidance while sharing best practice. This process also hones the peers skills in providing constructive challenge, analysing large amounts of information, quickly identifying clear and concise priorities and communicating sometimes difficult messages. Across the 61 children’s peer challenges that took place last year for example, 1,220 days were ‘time in kind’ from council officers on the peer challenge panels. This value is added through the relationship the LGA has

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Enabling%20Improvement.pdf>

² <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services/childrens-services-funding-facts>

with councils as well as the role played by the Principal Advisors, who act as a broker with leaders, chief executives and the Children's Improvement Advisors.

3. Finally, the reputation of the LGA is also key in this equation. It is seen as offering a quality service 'within the sector, for the sector' and encourages participation in the support as a trusted body. The benefit the LGA brand brings also adds to their ability to recruit quality CIAs. This also manifests in the sector improvements brought about by the LGA's lobbying role, ensuring the views and needs of the sector are represented in new policy and sector improvements.

The Reach of the LGA Offer:

Between April 2018 and March 2020...



...**62** peer challenges and follow-up visits took place in **52** different councils



... over **120** members attended leadership essentials courses from **81** different councils

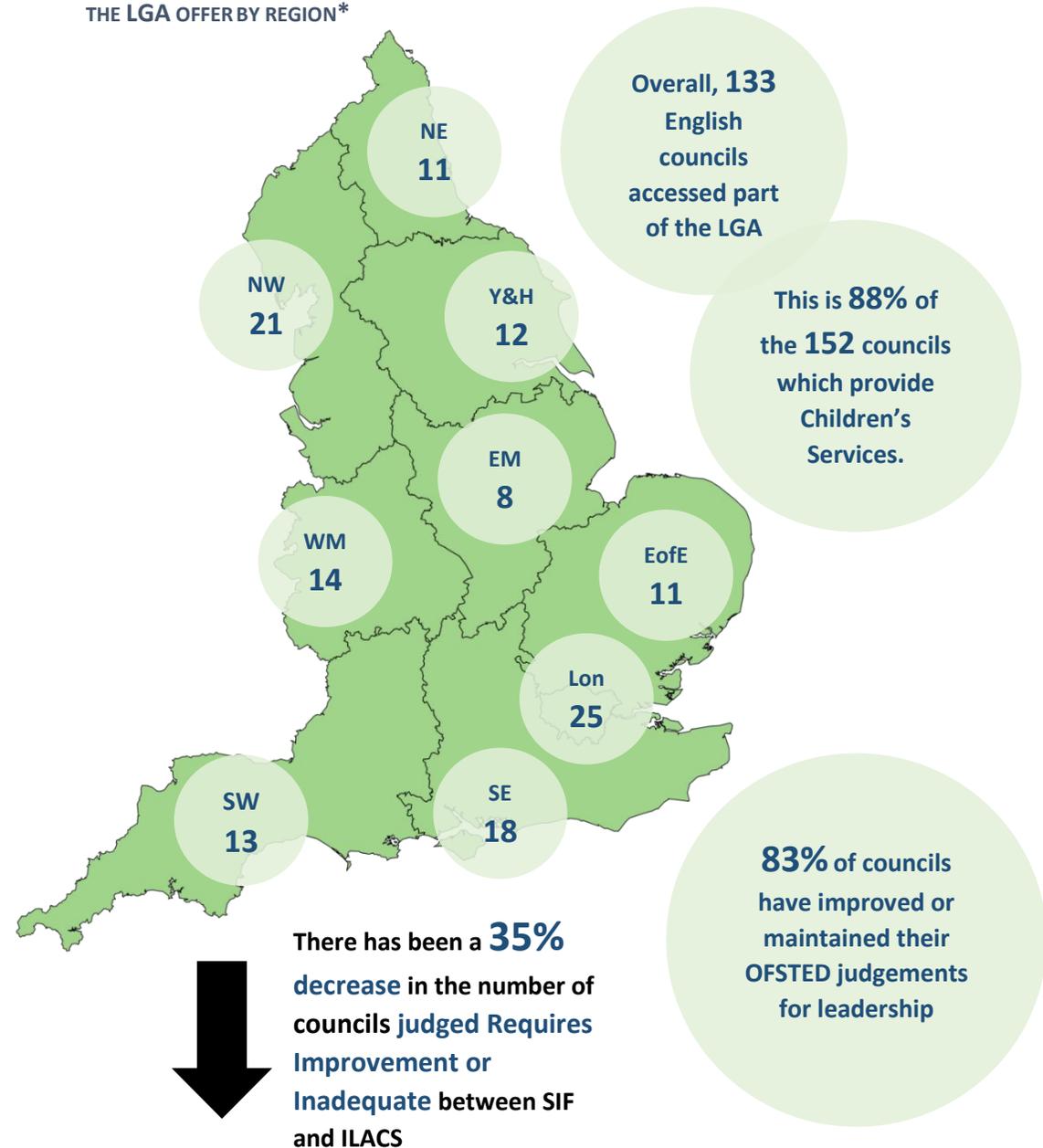


...members from **26** councils received peer mentoring



...the Children's Improvement Advisors spent time in **91** councils around England

FIGURE 2 NUMBER OF COUNCILS WHICH HAVE ACCESSED PART OF THE LGA OFFER BY REGION*



*note that not all councils in a region have the statutory role of providing Children's Services.

Is there a continuing need for the programme and is any change in focus needed?

The evaluation has gathered many examples of the impact that the support offer as a whole has had on councils' improvement journeys. It has directly impacted individuals in terms of their approach, behaviour and outlook, the relationships they have with colleagues and others within their councils, as well as approaches to working with other councils and in a regional network. The positive results of these improvements are diverse; from improved leadership in councils leading to better use of information and therefore better allocation of resources, to improved regional working and DCS level which has led to greater investment in the region.

The fact that this programme provides the only formal support offer for lead members means this programme has filled a gap. Overtime, the support has been an essential part of the induction, training and development for portfolio holders and has embedded learning across the council. The lead member support offer is also recommended for the purpose of providing consistent networking opportunities that are so highly valued by those who have participated in them.

For DCSs, who are often performing a very challenging role and addressing complex and sensitive issues, the SLI support provides reassurance and a resource for expertise and contacts through the CIA role. The CIA role is not only highly valued by those receiving support, but also by those in the wider sector. CIAs are often the link to a council at DCS and lead member level, but more importantly, their relationships with councils place them as one of the only providers of soft intelligence and insight into a council's circumstances, which is incredibly valuable to understanding a council's improvement journey and where support should be targeted.

The messages gained throughout this evaluation have been unanimous in support for continuation of the programme. Suggestions for refinements have been made in the next section in order to ensure the offer continues to meet the needs of councils in helping them to address ongoing challenges. It will also ensure the offer is accessible to all who could benefit from it.

Recommendations

This set of recommendations is the result of the fieldwork and analysis carried out during the course of the evaluation. It seeks to identify the main themes in which councils and the wider sector believe improvement could take place. It also sets out a number of actions for consideration.

These are:

- The future children's services SLI offer should be increasingly custom built and adapt quickly to the needs of the sector
- Better use of data could support the coordination, targeting and promotion of the children's services SLI offer
- A whole-council approach to improvement of children's services should be encouraged to ensure the greatest impact can be delivered
- Support to lead members and potential lead members could extend further to deliver wider improvements
- A more structured offer could be developed to support lead members

The future children's services SLI offer should be increasingly custom built and adapt quickly to the needs of the sector

Customisation of the offer at an individual council level is essential to delivering sector-led improvement. It does however rely heavily on individuals and a clear diagnosis of the challenges faced by each council.

One example that was raised numerous times is the increasing challenges faced by councils regarding Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). LGA research has set out that in 2019, 354,000 children and young people had education, health and care plans or statements (ECH) and that in 2018/19, councils faced a SEND funding gap of almost £500m³. Addressing these challenges and rising demand is an increasingly important focus for Directors of Children's Services. It is therefore crucial that partnership working and collaboration amongst key organisations can bring their experience together to identify the solutions. The LGA, as the national voice, critical friend and body of support for local government, has the potential to play an important role in this.

It is important that where efforts are successful and lessons are being learned on how to overcome challenges in delivering services for children, that these lessons are built into the improvement journey. System leadership has been highlighted as central to redefining the needs of the sector to support people-centred outcomes and working across partners is also key to ensuring that the approach taken can support councils.

CS SLI development

- Continue to develop a bespoke offer informed by continually emerging needs of the sector

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services/bright-futures-send-funding>

- Seek to widen the sector's influence with allied services and other parts of the public sector

Better use of data could support the coordination, targeting and promotion of the children's services SLI offer

This extends to two separate points raised during the fieldwork.

The first is in relation to the data held at a corporate level. Through the wider SLI offer, for example the Corporate Peer Challenge process, the reviewing team produces a report which includes a set of recommendations setting out what needs to be addressed. This process often highlights the need to focus on issues of culture, a corporate vision and an integration of services which impact directorates, services and council officers. These need to be recognised in order to ensure that the Children's Services Peer Challenge can use this information as a building block to work from.

There is also a plethora of quantitative data and analysis that is held centrally and by the PA's and CIA's, as well as through the Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances (RIIA). For example, the 'tartan rug' in the East of England helps the RIIA in its decision-making processes of where to target and deploy resources regionally. When used to support evidence-based decision-making, it is a valuable tool and can support learning from other places where there are enhanced results. The coordination and marketing of a more coherent support offer would therefore ensure councils are aware of what support is available, both to them and to others in the council.

The second relates to the fact that some councils are still unsure of what support is available to them. For councils requiring improvements to their children's services, and for those who have had an inadequate Ofsted rating, the space for support has been found to be crowded and difficult to navigate.

There is therefore more the LGA could do to refine and publicise the offer as a whole across the LGA and other partners. This should include identifying the appropriate time when support should be accessed, for example in providing a briefing to new portfolio holders, specifically listing the support available to them, what it is for, and the value the support has been found to have.

CS SLI development

- Review the information available across the LGA to support improved data sharing
- Create a tool which tracks qualitative and quantitative data to support children's services
- Develop a model to bring together data to support resource allocation and avoid duplication of effort
- Encourage better sharing of intelligence, gained through engagement with the LGA's wider corporate SLI offer, to deliver a more proactive rather than reactive reviewing of Ofsted indicators at an individual council level, and use this intelligence to persuade an authority to take up support.

This leads to the third recommendation.

A whole-council approach to improvement of children's services should be encouraged to ensure the greatest impact can be delivered

Many councils with a positive improvement journey or an improving Ofsted grade cited a whole council approach as being of a catalytic nature. Engaging with Chief Executives, leaders, lead members, other council services as well as surrounding councils were some of the key relationships highlighted.

While there are many influential factors in a council's approach to improvement, it should be explored further how this support offer could encourage councils to take a more whole-council approach to improving their children's services. For example, it is beneficial through a Children's Services Peer Challenge that the Chief Executive, political leaders, as well as directors of services throughout the council, are present throughout the review process.

Strong relationships between CIA's and PA's are central to this. In their collective capacity and knowledge of each council, the ability to bring the right people together to define the priority activity is key.

CS SLI development

- Consider how the role of the council as a Corporate Parent can be built into the children's services improvement journey
- Explore how Principal Advisors and Children's Improvement Advisors can work better across the SLI offer at a corporate level

Support to lead members and potential lead members could extend further to deliver wider improvements

The LGA is arguably the largest provider of training and development for those with political posts and has a strong track record of delivering a quality offer. It works across political parties, providing a safe space for councillors of all persuasions to come together to explore challenges and solutions relating to the provision of children's services. The support on offer is highly regarded by a large proportion of those accessing it. The LGA has an opportunity to encourage and develop a pipeline of new political careers.

The Children's Leadership Essentials (LE) course is highly regarded, and this research has shown the positive effect it has had on new lead members and their role of the portfolio holder for children's services.

The LGA could look further to extend the invitation for participation in Children's LE to those who may take up the children's portfolio or to offer an 'introductory course' for potential lead members interested in children's services. This may help provide reassurance on commencing the role and may help encourage LMs to stay in the role for longer. Furthermore, the LGA could encourage lead members to bring along council officers or other colleagues, for example the director of public health, to share the understanding of the issues councils face and the responsibilities councils have collectively in children's services. This may also help develop a whole-council approach, as discussed in recommendation three, in addressing the issues children's services face, and in the improvement journey.

Furthermore, while there currently is a well provisioned offer for lead members that have been newly elected as the children's portfolio holder, for example Children's Leadership Essentials and peer mentoring through this SLI offer, as well as LGA documents and digital resources made widely available. However, there currently is a gap in those resources that provide support for lead members who have been in the role for over one year. As mentioned above, this may be further compounded by Covid-19 and a change to the local election cycle as a result. The LGA could look to develop a support offer for more experienced lead members. This could, for example, take the form of a Leadership Essentials-style refresher course that cover update on changes in policy.

CS SLI developments:

- Extend Children's Leadership Essentials courses out to non-lead member roles to encourage a pipeline of new councillors and knowledge of children's services
- Develop a support offer for more experienced lead members

A more structured offer could be developed to support lead members

This recommendation relates to both the mentoring part of the SLI offer as well as the broader peer support network. Opportunities that come with taking part in a peer mentoring assignment have largely been very well regarded by both the mentors and mentees. However, there are some ways in which this part of the offer could be improved such as through a more structured approach. Specific points raised in interviews included:

- Mentors receiving more detailed contextual information on the council in which their mentee holds the children's portfolio
- Greater recruitment of new mentors from a pool of current and former lead members
- Encouragement for mentees to think of aims and objectives for their peer mentoring prior to commencement of the assignment, so a clear understanding of what the assignment will aim to achieve can be reached shortly after the assignment has begun
- More training for less experienced mentors in carrying out their assignments
- Introducing a scheduled follow up visit around six months after mentoring has finished so mentors can understand what has been influential for the council, and also to encourage mentees to take on a mentoring role themselves

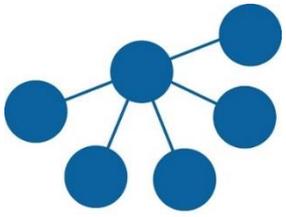
Leadership Essentials courses make it possible for lead members with varying experience, and from councils that have been through different improvement journeys, to come together. Furthermore, the networking opportunities and the new experiences brought about through peer challenge teams going into other councils outside of their region has also been highly valued, and helpful to learning from all sides.

However, there are currently no other opportunities for these connections to be made. Therefore, a more formal peer support network, open to all lead members from across the country could help continue to bring about similar benefits as the opportunity through LE.

CS SLI developments:

- Develop a more structured support offer around peer mentoring for lead members

- Develop a more formal peer support network that goes beyond regional boundaries to include greater networking opportunities for members as an alternative to formal peer mentoring
- Work more closely with the political office at the LGA to refresh the matching process and expand the mentor / mentee relationship
- Develop a framework that can evaluate and measure the impact of the peer mentoring process



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