

Children's Services Peer Challenge

Guidance Manual

October 2024

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1. Introduction

This guidance manual provides an overview of a Children's Services peer challenge. It is not intended to be prescriptive as each challenge will have its own individual features, and additional information will be provided to the council as part of the planning process once a peer challenge has been agreed. It reflects the experience and learning from over 180 safeguarding reviews and challenges. The steps set out in the manual provide a firm base for ensuring that each peer challenge can be conducted successfully.

The fundamental aim of each peer challenge is to help councils and their partners reflect on and improve the impact of practices and services for children, young people and families.

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

Each peer challenge will be different and will be tailored to the individual needs of a council and its partners. There will be core elements common to each peer challenge but also optional elements from which the overall challenge can be designed. Which elements are used will be the subject of discussion with the host council.

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

- Key documents such as Children's Plan, Corporate Plan, Early Help Strategy, Workforce Development Strategy, Improvement Plan
- Position statement relating to the agreed key lines of enquiry
- Child Analysis Tool (ChAT) data analysis
- LGA review of approximately 25 case files
- Self-evaluation of practice prepared by the LA for the Ofsted annual conversation
- Performance data (last six months)
- A sample of case audits undertaken by the authority in the preceding six months, including multi-agency audits.
- Interviews with elected members and staff from the council, partners, commissioned services and other stakeholders (as applicable to the challenge theme)

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

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

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

2. The peer challenge themes

Each peer challenge will always focus on three core elements with additional optional areas selected by the Council. The number of modules depends on the theme, typically two additional areas are chosen. It is critical for peer challenges to be tightly focused and targeted to deliver within the timeline and so the scoping meeting is critical in ensuring that the peer challenge has a clear focus.

Core elements

These focus on the essential areas of Children's Services:

- Leadership and management, including vision and strategy
- Effective practice and impact on outcomes for children and families
- Resources and capacity – are leaders creating the right environment for good social work practice?

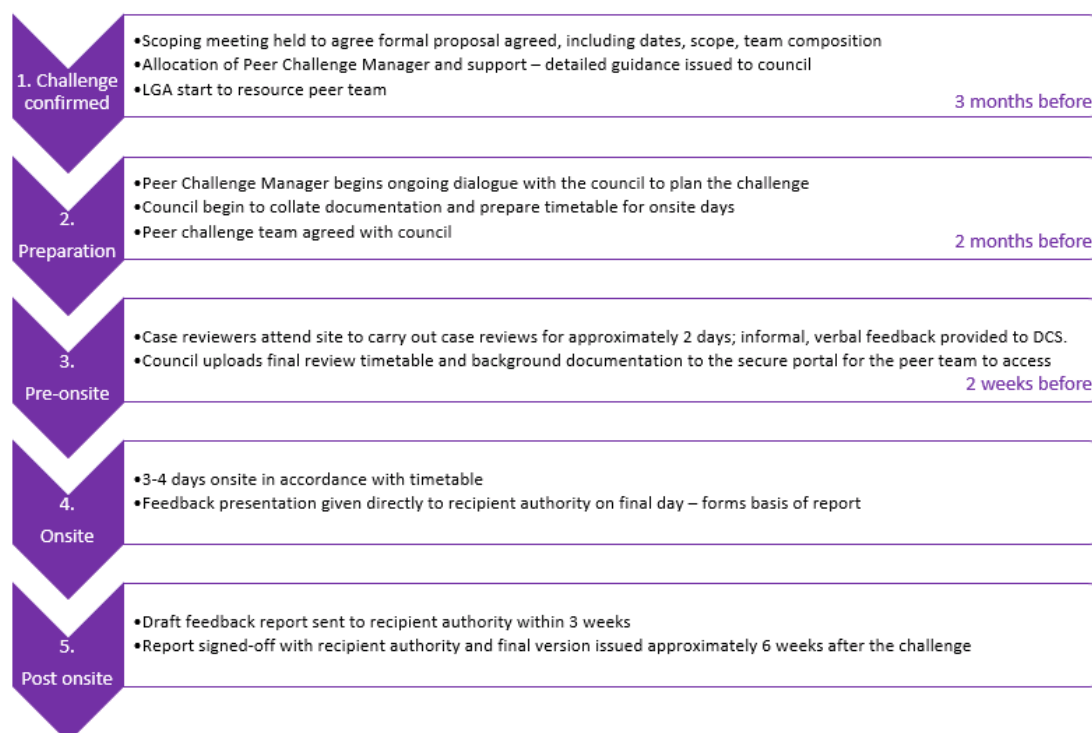
Thematic modules/diagnostics

- Impact and effectiveness of partnerships
- Demand management
- Corporate Leadership and Capacity for Children's Services
- Early Help
- Front door
- Child In Need (CIN)
- Child Protection (CP)
- Children with disabilities
- Sufficiency and outcomes for children looked after
- Care leavers
- Quality Assurance & Performance Management
- Specific vulnerabilities/risks, for example Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) or Domestic Abuse.

The above is not a definitive list and requests for additional key lines of enquiry can be discussed as part of the initial scoping discussion with the LGA Programme Manager.

[Click here](#) for full details of the lines of enquiry covered in core and thematic modules.

3. Peer challenge stages



4. The peer challenge team

The LGA pulls together a team to deliver each peer challenge; the membership of the team will depend on the scope of the peer challenge. However, typically it will include the following:

Team member	Indicative number of days involvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A director/assistant director of children’s services (team leader) 	Length of challenge + pre-reading + 1 off-site day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three or four senior operational managers from social care/health/education/police (this will depend on the areas of focus and the number of case reviews required) 	Length of challenge + pre-reading and support with final report
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A peer challenge manager 	This will be agreed in advance and will depend on the scope of the peer challenge.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Lead Member (optional – depending on the theme) 	Length of challenge + 1 off-site day plus pre-reading and support with final report

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

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

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

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

5. The council responsibilities

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

The **peer challenge sponsor** should be the DCS or Director of People (or equivalent). The role of the sponsor is to commission the peer challenge, ensure there is high level commitment to the process from staff and partners and agree the scope and themes for the peer challenge with the LGA. The sponsor will ensure that the facilities and organisation required are in place.

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

6. Confidentiality, data protection and personal data

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

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

Communications and publicity

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

Although the final letter is the property of the receiving council and is not published by the LGA, its purpose is to enable improvement and learning. The council will want to consider where and when the outcome of the peer challenge will be discussed. If the final letter is to be reported to the council executive, a scrutiny committee or a NHS body, it will become a public document. There may be local media interest but pro-active PR is not recommended.

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

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

The final report will be sent to the Director of Children's Services (DCS) or agreed project sponsor if this is a different person.

7. Set-up and scoping stage

The LGA Programme Manager will arrange a meeting with the DCS or Director of People who will act as the council's peer challenge sponsor. The LGA regional Children's Improvement Advisor will also be invited to this meeting.

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

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

8. Peer challenge preparation

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

- Advance documentation and performance information ([more information](#))
- On-site peer challenge timetable (see [guidance and template](#))

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

9. Case record review

Approximately three weeks ahead of the on-site phase, the case record review will take place. Cases will be selected by the Peer Challenge Manager/Lead Peer from lists agreed as part of scoping discussions.

Reviewers will look at the case recording (and will require system access to do so) and will have discussions with the social workers and managers for a number of cases.

It is very important to note that the conversations with staff are conducted in keeping with the spirit of the peer challenge i.e. as a supportive critical friend and not as an inspector.

At the end of the case review activity, the peers will hold a brief, informal discussion with the peer challenge sponsor to provide a summary of the findings and key messages.

A written report will be produced, will be shared with the peer team and council before the on-site phase begins and will form an appendix of the final report.

10. On-site phase

The sub-sections below go through the key stages of the on-site stage. This is the key focus of the peer challenge process and is heavily dependent upon detailed planning and preparation and a clear agreed scope in place. It is a demanding experience for both the peer team and the host council and requires considerable joint working to ensure its success.

No surprises policy

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

The Team Leader and Peer Challenge Manager should also give the council's peer 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. However, it is the independent peer team's presentation and they should present what they have found (both strengths and areas for further consideration) in an open, easy to understand and constructive manner, albeit in a manner that is sensitive to the council's situation.

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

Council overview presentation

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

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

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

- lead member for children's services
- director of children's services/council peer challenge sponsor
- relevant assistant directors/heads of service
- any partner agencies the authority considers appropriate to the scope of the peer challenge

On-site interviews, focus groups and observations

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

The [timetable template](#) includes a list of people who should be considered for interview; this list will be discussed and agreed between the Peer Challenge Organiser and Manager to ensure those relevant to the key lines of enquiry are included.

Practice Observations

The Council should provide the Peer Challenge Manager with a list of activity taking place during the on-site phase that would be suitable for peer observation. The Peer Challenge Manager will liaise with the Peer Challenge Organiser to attend any practice observations. This will help inform the culture and effective practice themes of the challenge.

Feedback Meeting

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

The presentation will also highlight any good practice that the team think should be shared within the Council's region.

11. The written feedback

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

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

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

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

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

12. Post-challenge evaluation

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

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

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

Following the peer challenge and production of the final report, the LGA Children's Improvement Advisor will liaise with the council to agree any next steps and follow up activity.

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