

Case Study

Cambridgeshire County Council:

A fast-paced turnaround of children's services

In September 2012, an Ofsted inspection of Cambridgeshire County Council's safeguarding children arrangements found them to be 'inadequate'. Managers and leaders swiftly set about putting a self-led improvement plan in place, tapping into sector support to provide an external view and expertise. Within two years, Cambridgeshire had become the first local authority in the country to jump two categories at once when a follow-up Ofsted inspection rated Cambridgeshire's children's services as 'good'.

Acknowledging the problems

In the summer of 2012, Cambridgeshire was halfway through a major change programme as it converted to the 'Reclaiming Social Work' model of social care developed in Hackney. This transition provided some context for the Ofsted rating, although councillors were quick to re-confirm their commitment to the new model as soon as the inspection ended. In addition, difficulties in recruiting permanent staff and workload pressures had resulted in the unsuccessful creation of a temporary team of agency staff. Earlier in 2012, an LGA children's safeguarding peer challenge had also highlighted some areas for consideration.

By coincidence, the new manager tasked with putting things right started work on the day of the Ofsted inspection. However, no excuses were made, and managers and councillors accepted the findings, acknowledging that there had been some complacency in practice and some significant service weaknesses, including and beyond those identified by Ofsted.

Accessing external support

Cambridgeshire immediately began taking practical steps towards improvement. Its strategy was to lead change from within the council while tapping into all available national and regional support. A shadow Improvement Board met nine days after the inspection ended.

Prompt support was brokered through the then Children's Improvement Board, starting with a review of options for Cambridgeshire's systems. Department for Education (DfE) funding was also used to commission a programme of external case file audits, with the issues arising forming the basis of a training programme. At the same time, support was sought from the East of England LGA.

The shadow arrangements were formalised with the DfE's approval and from then on the Improvement Board met monthly as the 'engine room' of the efforts. The board included senior managers, the lead member for children and young people, representatives from local partners including health, the local safeguarding children board, police and schools, the DfE and an external director of children's services.

The DfE recognised that Cambridgeshire had the capacity to lead change from within and supported its approach of self-led improvement with sector support. Cambridgeshire's Chief Executive, Mark Lloyd, was appointed Chair of the Improvement Board – boards usually have an external chair but the DfE and other stakeholders recognised that Cambridgeshire was capable of leading the change process.

Setting out an improvement plan and engaging staff

The board's first task was to develop an improvement plan. This set out in detail all the actions to be taken under four key themes: improving quality, improving implementation of learning, improving tools and improving strategic partnerships. The plan set out clear objectives, actions and timescales, who would lead each element of work and how the Board would monitor progress. It focused on sustainable and system-wide improvements, prioritising key actions and deliverables, measuring impact and monitoring how well the actions were embedded. The plan was kept as a 'live' document, modified and added to over time.

As an example, under 'improving quality' the actions included reducing the reliance on agency staff, undertaking a monthly review of the children's social care workforce profile, delivering a workforce development programme and providing all staff with regular supervision. For each action there was a clearly defined success measure, a named lead officer and a record of progress made.

The plan also set out the Improvement Board's oversight role: it would ensure that the children's safeguarding service had an agreed performance framework, articulated standards, indicators and outcome measures, and that it maintained a focus on continuous improvement. The lead member would lead key decisions while the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee would provide oversight and challenge.

A less detailed 'Busy Workers' version of the improvement plan was created to clearly communicate the priority actions to practitioners, partners and managers. A monthly practitioner group, usually led by the service director for children's social care, gave all frontline staff an opportunity to provide input on the change programme. An email account was set up to receive comments, both positive and critical, from staff.

Feedback from the practitioner group was a standing item on the Improvement Board agenda. Staff groups were brought together for discussions around progress, what was or was not working, and where there were gaps in the improvement process. This was fed into the improvement plan.

Cambridgeshire's elected members received reports on progress at both the Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Otherwise, the role of councillors focused on providing political leadership, support and challenge. In effect, councillors had already done this through approving the move to the Reclaiming Social Work model, and the lead member was on the programme board overseeing its implementation.

Regional and national support

The LGA's Principal Adviser for the East of England, Rachel Litherland, brokered and arranged national support to assist the improvement process, identifying peers to provide support and making links to the national Children's Improvement Board and lead politicians. Councillor David Simmons, Chairman of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, was key in negotiating Cambridgeshire's Improvement Board to be allowed to be chaired by its chief executive.

The Eastern Region has a strong and well-established network of peer support. Other authorities were quick to offer support, advice and challenge to the senior managers and lead members. The more formal challenge came through two regional peer challenges, in May and October 2013, which were funded from regional resources and largely involved peers from the region. The reviewers worked with Cambridgeshire to hone in on four to five key areas for each review which were aligned with key improvement priorities. They included progress against the Ofsted areas of improvement; quality and consistency of practice; the sharpness, focus and quality of plans; and the response to domestic violence.

These peer challenges were invaluable, says Adrian Loades, Cambridgeshire's Executive Director for Children, Families and Adult Services, as they reported back with some tough messages as well as more positive feedback. "We made a plea to the teams to provide us with the strongest possible challenge to ensure that we could maximise the opportunity to drive improvement, and they rose to the challenge well." Each peer challenge prompted an update of the improvement plan to pick up any new issues or modify actions as necessary.

Transformation in action

Progress was swift. By February 2013, six months after the 'inadequate' judgement, Cambridgeshire had completed its planned actions for the Ofsted areas of improvement and had developed a further improvement plan. The Improvement Board noted that the improvement had extended "beyond the recommendations attached to the 'inadequate' judgement and the improvement notice."

Loades says that one key factor behind this speedy progress was the immediate acceptance of the Ofsted findings without any sense of denial. "This was reinforced by very quickly moving into 'implement' mode and setting a quick pace for improvement," he adds. Improvement focused on practice, reinforced by enhanced quality assurance arrangements, so that everybody could see their role in the process. "This wasn't something that just senior managers were focused on, it had to be a whole-system response."

A follow-up Ofsted inspection in June 2014, less than two years after the first, gave children's services in Cambridgeshire a 'good' rating – an unprecedented leap of two ratings in one go.

The report said: “Council leaders and senior managers have responded purposefully and systematically to the improvement agenda. Monthly Improvement Board meetings have ensured a sustained focus on improving practice quality and learning within the workforce and on developing effective multi-agency partnership arrangements.” The report made further recommendations and Cambridgeshire’s improvement journey continues. The move towards a new model of social care has bedded in well.

Staff and members were enthusiastic about the improvement process and rose to the challenge, says Loades. Strong political leadership was also important, led by the council’s leader and the lead members for children and young people (different people have held this post during the process), who provided a balance of support and challenge. Cross-party political support was also important.

Councillor Joan Whitehead, the current Lead Member for Children and Young People, says: “The Ofsted judgement had a galvanising effect on the council and its services. It was not the time for denial and despair. Instead, our focus was on providing the support and challenge to ensure rapid and sustained improvement and ultimately to be better at keeping children safe. The council’s faith in its workforce was totally justified given the scale of the improvement in such a short space of time.”

There was no sense of blame from councillors for the ‘inadequate’ rating. They did not lose confidence in the shift towards a new model of social care, and this provided stability and focus for the improvement effort. Loades says: “Credit should be paid to our politicians across the political spectrum. They agreed that what was important was a focus on safeguarding, and that is not a political issue.”

For further information contact Adrian Loades, Executive Director: Children, Families and Adult Services, Cambridgeshire County Council:
adrian.loades@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Local Government Association

Local Government House, Smith Square

London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000 Fax 020 7664 3030

Email info@local.gov.uk www.local.gov.uk

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