

City of Wolverhampton Council, Early Years (Speech, Language and Communication) Peer Challenge

Date from 25 to 28 June 2019

Feedback Report

Executive Summary

It was clear throughout the entire challenge process that the importance of a child's early years is recognised across the partnership. It is also noticeable that the City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) includes this as a key theme within its Council Plan which outlines its vision for the city. This recognition is underpinned by committed leadership and staff at all levels, many of whom showed true passion regarding the services they provide.

Although partnership working is developing, there is not a clear, collective shared vision for early years services supported by an integrated whole systems approach. There are opportunities that should be taken to sharpen the strategic governance, development and evaluation of system wide early years services. In view of the importance of whole system working, a distinction is made throughout the report of using the words 'early years' when discussing the system, as distinct from 'Early Years' Team' when discussing the Council's specifically titled team.

Numerous effective initiatives were evidenced, including some examples of good inter agency projects / joint working 'on the ground' e.g. the strengthening families hubs. These individual initiatives are already in place and can help form the basis for a co-ordinated whole system approach. The Council also has a proactive approach to developing services, despite facing budget challenges, and it is noticeable that early years education performance has improved in recent years despite these pressures.

One particular aspect of whole system/partnership working is that there is currently a lack of clarity regarding what comprises the collective early years 'offer'. This lack of clarity is caused in part by reductions in the previous range of universal services in recent years. It would aid both partners and families if there were clarification of the offer and communication regarding the pathways for accessing services. Allied to this, it is important for partners to remember that the decrease in universal services mentioned may impact across all whole system outcomes.

Initiatives have been undertaken to enhance parental contribution to the design and development of services e.g. the Parent Champions and Parent Ambassadors schemes. This has resulted in some good work and support to families. However, the impact, awareness and understanding of the role of Parent Champions and Ambassadors does not appear high and community engagement generally as regards design and development is not well developed. An important part of the whole systems approach is the contribution from all partners including parent, community and voluntary groups. Their contribution should be fully recognised and harnessed.

Joint commissioning requires significant development across early years services. Although there is expertise within individual services there was little evidence of this being used in a collective whole system approach. One particular aspect of commissioning is the Healthy Child Programme which is intended to provide a framework to support collaborative work and more integrated delivery - although the 0-5 element is usually led by health services (midwives, GP's and Health Visitors). Commissioners across the system need to be clearer about the contribution they expect from the Healthy Child Programme, how this will be delivered and to monitor services in a collective fashion.

The Council and partners have already identified the desirability of joint workforce planning and development. This is the subject of a specific workstream under the revised arrangements agreed by the Children and Families Together Board in December 2018. Work on this is at a very early stage but it is hoped that it will be possible, when fully underway, that advantage will be taken of opportunities to harness skills and expertise across the system

The evaluation of activities requires development so that it can be used to stimulate action. The self - assessment provided correctly states that currently *'Collective data is not currently being used to inform change and learning from local interventions and does not always lead to improvement across services'*. Effective evaluation will be helped by the creation of a clear, collective shared vision for early years services together with a shared understanding of what comprises the collective offer.

Overall, therefore, there is a mixture of numerous examples of existing good practice together with further opportunities that should be taken to enhance services and outcomes. In addition to the true passion and proactive approach demonstrated, one of the major advantages that the Council and its partners has is that there is good self-awareness of this mixture and the self-assessment provided is an accurate reflection of the progress made and the challenges facing early years services. By using this self-awareness and passion, coupled with the creation of a collective strategy and whole system approach, the Council and its partners should have a good base for future development and impact upon the early years of the children of Wolverhampton.

Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- 1. Collectively ensure that the early years governance arrangements and the strategy review are evidence based and support a whole system and whole family approach:** A review of the early years strategy is already underway. The resultant strategy should be a clear plan as to what partners will do collectively and the outcomes they seek. This strategy should be supported by overall governance arrangements that provide robust drive, monitoring and challenge at all levels for system wide early years services
- 2. Create a shared clear vision for your early years services which is supported by a simple and widely understood definition of your collective offer:** In order for the early years strategy to be effective, it should be clearly linked to an overall vision as to what partners are trying to achieve and an agreed understanding as to what will be offered collectively
- 3. Actively involve parents and communities in shaping and delivering services:** All elements of partnership working need to be embraced and include a wide range of stakeholders. The inclusion of parents and community / voluntary groups in design and delivery has fallen over time and steps should be taken to encourage and facilitate their involvement

4. **Communicate broadly your defined offer and the pathways for families with young children:** There is not a shared understanding as to what the collective offer is or how it can be accessed. Clarification and communication of this would aid joint working and, most importantly, help families access services
5. **Develop a performance dashboard with a shared data set from all partners reflecting the whole child's development:** Whole system monitoring, accountability and challenge would be enhanced through the creation of a 'Whole Child' dashboard that is shared and is an integral part of the governance arrangements. It is understood that the early years steering group is already working on this
6. **As part of your emerging whole system approach, seek opportunities to increase joint commissioning across early years services:** Joint commissioning is currently not well developed and working together on joint commissioning projects would aid a whole system approach and synergy between partners
7. **Follow through your intention to create a joint workforce planning and development approach:** Your recognition of the benefits of joint workforce planning and development is welcomed by the peer team who encourage you to build on your early work as soon as possible in order to harness talent across the system
8. **Develop a clear Speech Language Communication Needs (SLCN) offer with a closing the gap plan which is supported by the speech and language therapy service:** The overall early years strategy should explicitly cover the importance of speech and language and have a clear offer for families which is supported by specialist expertise in the speech and language therapy service.

Summary of the peer challenge approach

Independent external evaluation and feedback from the sector has endorsed peer challenge as an approach that promotes learning from a sector-led improvement perspective. All local authorities and their partners are constantly striving to improve outcomes for children, but an external and independent view can help to accelerate or consolidate progress.

On the 12th December 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) launched *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education*. A key strand within the DfE social mobility action plan is a focus on sector led improvement across Early Years provision, driven through peer challenge and support.

The DfE has worked with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) to develop this sector led improvement offer.

The challenge team was sourced specifically to address the four primary areas of focus highlighted by City of Wolverhampton Council. The team consisted of senior colleagues with significant experience of leading and managing early years services within local government, health and education, supported by an experienced LGA challenge manager.

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced officer peers. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and their participation was agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge were:

- Candida Brudenell, Lead Peer - Assistant Chief Executive / Corporate Director for Strategy and Resources at Nottingham City Council and former Strategic Director of Early Intervention
- Rebecca Bibby, Early Years Peer - Head of Service for Starting Life Well and Helping Families at Salford City Council
- Moira Hunt, Education Peer - Interim Headteacher at Navigate Resources Ltd and former Head Teacher of Lister Primary School
- Michelle Morris, Speech and Language Specialist Peer - Consultant Speech and Language Therapist, Early Intervention Foundation Associate and Designated Clinical Officer at Salford CCG
- Mandy Sheffield, Health Peer - Head of Safeguarding at NHS Wakefield Clinical Commissioning Group
- Bob Ross, LGA Review Manager

The process

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Wolverhampton during which they:

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 24 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 225 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in Wolverhampton.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit on 28 June 2019. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

Scope and focus

You identified four primary areas of focus for the peer challenge that were agreed at the beginning of the scoping process and through the self-assessment using the Early Years, Speech, Language and Communication Maturity Matrix:

- Strategy – including leadership voice and culture
- Partnership – with an emphasis on joint workforce planning
- Community ownership – engagement
- Evaluation – including using and generating evidence

Main findings

5.1 Strategy – including leadership voice and culture

There is a clear recognition across the partnership of the importance of a child's early years. This is formally recognised in the Council Plan which has '*Children and young people get the best possible start in life*' as one of its six key priorities. Leaders and staff at all levels actively support this recognition by demonstrating a genuine passion for the services they provide. People seen throughout the challenge process were able to articulate clearly their work and the direct effect it has on families and young children. This passion is a major strength for the City of Wolverhampton.

There is good self-awareness regarding the progress made and challenges facing early years services. A self-assessment was provided to the peer team which accurately reflects these. Partners already have in place a number of effective initiatives and have also identified areas where further development is required. These include the need to review the existing early years strategy, plus the measures approved by the Children and Families Together Board to enhance the working arrangements to take the strategy forward. These steps are supported by the peer team, but there are a number of points below that the team would like to stress in support of the actions being taken.

Firstly, it is evident that within the Council there is strong collective leadership across Education and Children's services. Relationships are very good and there is effective joint working and planning at this senior level, including regular joint officer management team meetings. Broader partnership working continues to develop and there are some examples of good joint working. However, the governance across the partnership does not support a real 'whole system' approach. There is a variety of reasons for this - most noticeably the need for a revised early years strategy (which has been recognised) that has a whole system approach, a collective vision for the services, and enhanced monitoring and challenge, including at Board/ Member level.

In view of the importance of whole system working, a distinction is made throughout this report of using the words 'early years' when discussing the system, as distinct from 'Early Year's Team' when discussing the Council's specifically titled team. It is crucial that the review of the early years strategy results in a strategy that is clearly a collective responsibility and not just that of the Early Years Team. It should be a clear plan as to what partners will do collectively and the desired outcomes they have identified jointly. This strategy should be supported by overall governance

arrangements that provide robust drive, monitoring and challenge for system wide early years services including at Board level.

To support the above approach, it will first be necessary to create a shared clear vision for early years services which is supported by a simple and widely understood definition of the collective partnership offer. This need is due in part to changes to universal services provision that have resulted in a lack of clarity regarding what is on offer and this needs to be re-affirmed. By doing so there will also be benefits to future monitoring and challenge. Once created, leaders should develop simple key messages that explain clearly to all partners, families and stakeholders, the vision, strategy and full offer.

A particular aspect of communicating the offer is to ensure that there are clear pathways, as during the peer challenge it was apparent that these are not commonly understood. It is important that parents understand the ways into the system and partners understand and support transitions through it.

Another specific aspect that should feature in the strategy review, is the need to identify and articulate a clear speech and language offer which is outcome focussed and supported by a closing the gap plan. At present the Speech and language Therapy (SLT) service is commissioned to deliver specialist services under a specification which needs updating as part of the strategy review implementation. The expertise within SLT could be used to increase significantly the reach of language and communication support if additional time was commissioned from the service to help others who deliver targeted and universal interventions. This could take the form of creating communication friendly environments, developing skills in other services and providing support for others delivering language enrichment activities. Some of this is already happening e.g. a training course for encouraging families to support communication at home has been developed by early help staff but this is not quality assured by SLT and there is no set of evidence based core messages or a focus on the home learning environment. To close the word gap at a population level there should be a systematic way to identify language and communication needs, with standardised tools and a city-wide offer of intervention groups supported, but not delivered, by SLT. This should be accompanied by clear pathways through to specialist services if targeted interventions are insufficient to close the gap

In common with many other geographical areas nationwide, there did not appear to be a shared understanding across the partnership of 'readiness for school'. Co-producing and articulating such an understanding would be valuable to support the continuity of a child's learning journey and better support collective working by early years professionals. It is suggested that there be an explicit discussion amongst partners as to the agreed shared expectations of children's school readiness that best enables effective transition into school. This should also include ensuring how schools can be best placed with the right information from previous settings and other professionals about individual children.

The peer team would also like to recognise that there is a proactive approach to developing services, initiating projects, bidding activities etc. It is noticeable that there has been improved education performance in recent years despite budget pressure. Such a proactive attitude at all levels should greatly assist the further development of the early year's strategy and its implementation.

5.2 Partnership – with an emphasis on joint workforce planning

The need for partnership working is well understood and valued, with good personal working relationships evident. Within the Council there is particularly good partnership working between the Early Years and SEND teams. There are also some examples of good inter agency projects / joint working 'on the ground' e.g. strengthening families hubs, the GEM centre which supports overall early years work and is a valued asset. Strong feedback was also received from private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings, together with schools, regarding the work of the Early Years Team.

There are also various examples of joint partnership initiatives and partnership bids that have been undertaken to help promote partnership working e.g. the successful Early Outcomes Fund bid across four authorities and which has '*Eradicate siloed working by developing a multi-agency Speech, Language, Communication and Literacy vision, strategy and pathways underpinned by individual authority improvement plans*' as its priority 1. This bid should help support collective governance and multi-agency training.

There is a good level of awareness that partnership working needs to develop further to achieve a whole systems approach. This applies at five levels: governance / senior partnership, commissioning, operational, workforce and community as discussed below.

Governance / Senior Partnership: At a governance/senior partnership level, collective monitoring and constructive challenge across the system requires development. Although there were some examples of senior review (such as the changes agreed by the Children and Families Together Board in December 2018) there was little evidence of regular robust monitoring at a senior partnership level. The governance arrangements should support such an approach and monitoring and challenge would be aided by a performance dashboard with a shared data set from all partners reflecting the whole child's development.

Commissioning: There is commissioning expertise in each partner and individual service teams. However, early years joint commissioning requires significant development as part of an early year's whole system approach. One particular aspect of commissioning is that there are tensions and ambiguity regarding the expected contribution and level of performance under the Heathy Child Programme. In order to help resolve this issue, commissioners across the system need to have a clearer collective understanding regarding the contribution they expect from the Programme.

Operational: At an operational level, services delivering early years are often run in parallel rather than a truly 'joined up' approach. The peer team found examples of services that were identifying the same and/or similar gaps in provision, such as parenting support, and then separately identifying interventions and training to address these gaps. Allied to this, professionals were able to describe their own teams' role and services but often not how they connected to or complemented other services. They also used discrete professional language which can be confusing. Communication on the early years offer across the system would naturally support integrated working and prevent duplication and parallel working.

Workforce: this area has been specifically identified as a priority as there is currently very limited joint workforce planning and development. A workstream is underway, although this is at an early stage, but it is hoped that it will be possible, when fully underway, that advantage will be taken of opportunities to harness skills and expertise across the system. In addition to the Early Outcomes Fund bid mentioned above there has also been a successful bid for training for health visitors which will help overall workforce development. One further specific aspect is that there have recently been very few opportunities provided for PVI training - who can be viewed as part of the wider partnership workforce. However, there are two cohorts of PVIs expected to benefit from training for early language, literacy and numeracy through the Professional Development Programme.

Community: Community engagement is discussed in section 5.3 below where it is noted that there is scope for considerable development in this area. It is important that partnership working operates as broadly as possible and recognition should be given of all partners contributions to improving early years services, including that provided by community and voluntary groups.

Although several areas of development have been identified to create a whole systems approach, partners generally are keen to work together collectively to improve early years outcomes and the suggestions made are to build on the base that already exists.

5.3 Community ownership – engagement

The Council has been proactive in developing Parent Ambassador and Parent Champion schemes to help promote the importance of child development and support to parents e.g. Champions share information with parents/carers regarding how to choose childcare and promote health messages including to difficult to reach families. An additional coordinator has been appointed due to the expansion of the scheme. However, the actual impact of these roles has not been evaluated. There is also a need to increase awareness of their activities and how the services are accessed, as this was very inconsistent across the partnership and settings.

The Council is also proactive in encouraging the take up of funded places and, obviously, this should continue. Despite these positive initiatives there was very limited evidence of direct parental involvement in the development of strategy or services. The self-assessment recognises this and flags up that 'there are opportunities to learn from SEND colleagues where the parental voice is strong'.

Similarly, there is also considerable scope to improve the involvement of communities and community groups in co-production. There is currently no structured community engagement strategy and action plan. Methods to harness the views, talents and commitment of these key stakeholders in designing and delivering early years services should form part of the new early year's strategy.

The need for a universal parenting programme is recognised by partners and some work has been undertaken across the partnerships to ensure that services are working together and not duplicating or delivering differing interventions. There is still a tendency for some of this to duplicate or appear dis-jointed, and partners should critically appraise parenting programmes and select that which will be the one promoted across the board.

It was recognised that the SEND Service have done considerable work around engagement and co-production with children and families. This is a model that they and the peer team feel can be shared used as a model to effectively engage with parents. As an example, at the GEM Centre parents of children with disabilities have been supported by professionals and these parents have subsequently self-organised into a group that supports new parents accessing the services.

5.4 Evaluation – including using and generating evidence

A 'light touch' approach was agreed and adopted regarding the Evaluation theme during the challenge process. This is primarily because there is already very good self-awareness regarding this, with the self-assessment correctly stating that although there is a wide range of performance data available, '*Collective data is not currently being used to inform change and learning from local interventions and does not always lead to improvement across services*'. As stated earlier in the report, the peer team also identified that there is little evidence of evaluation of performance across the partnership as part of a whole systems approach.

Effective evaluation will probably not be possible until the review of the early year's strategy is complete and with clear outcomes and accountabilities having been developed. It is understood that, in anticipation of this, a set of joint indicators which can be monitored collectively is being developed. The use of this set of indicators should be incorporated into the governance of the early years strategy, including at Board level. However, it was also noted that the strategy review is already stimulating examination of evidence and impact of activities as reflected in the self-assessment

Another aspect of evaluation is that greater use should be made of sharing performance monitoring information with frontline services. This will help stimulate awareness and improvement and it is noticeable that nursery schools are pro-active in using their performance data to enhance their provision and performance.

There is limited use of existing evidence based intervention tools. It appears that services are developing their own interventions, which do not have an evidence base, as opposed to using existing intervention tools used elsewhere that have a recognised evidence base e.g. the interventions identified through the Early Intervention Foundation. An example of this is the parenting intervention that is currently being developed to deliver a universal and targeted parenting offer.

Next Steps

We hope that you will find the above to be a considered and true reflection of the discussions we had with you, your staff, your partners and families in Wolverhampton. I'm sure that you and your colleagues will now want to consider how you can incorporate the team's findings into your ongoing planning. Relevant details are included below should you wish to access further support either via the LGA or your own regional networks.

For further improvement support you can contact the LGA's Principal Advisor, Helen Murray, Telephone 07884 312 235 e-mail Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk or the LGA's Children Improvement Adviser Claire Burgess, telephone 07854 407337, e mail claire.burgess23@gmail.com

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) have been commissioned by the Department for Education to provide further bespoke post challenge support to a limited number of councils. If you wish to be considered for this, please contact Ben Lewing at the EIF Email: ben.lewing@eif.org.uk.

Once again, thank you for participating in this review and please pass on our gratitude to everyone involved, particularly Amanda Newbold and Tanbir Duhra for their excellent preparation work and assistance throughout the challenge.