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Dear Nigel

Children's Peer Challenge: Leeds, December 2014

Thank you for taking part in the eighth Children's Services Peer Challenge activity in the region and the fourth peer challenge to have school improvement as its focus. As you know, the Peer Challenge focussed on your chosen theme of the effectiveness of support and challenge for school governance arrangements in Leeds.

Your preparatory work for this Peer Challenge was extensive and was immensely helpful in enabling the peer challenge team to focus its activity appropriately. The team received a really good welcome and excellent co-operation and support throughout the process. It was evident to us all that all those we met were interested in learning and continued development.

We agreed to send you a letter confirming and elaborating on our findings as presented at the end of the Peer Challenge process.

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. A team of peers used their experience to reflect on the evidence you presented through documentation, conversation and observation. We hope their conclusions, captured in our final presentation to you and in this report will assist you in your on-going improvement.

Director: Jon Stonehouse

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1. Background

The Peer Challenge process developed for Children's Services across Yorkshire and the Humber builds on the peer review model that was developed by the Local Government Association (LGA) and all 15 local authorities are engaged in the process. Across the region two key areas of focus have emerged: local authority arrangements to safeguard and look after children and local authority processes for securing school improvement. All local authorities have chosen one of these focus areas for their Peer Challenge.

In order to support the Peer Challenge process all local authorities have nominated key members from their senior leadership teams including their Director of Children's Services (DCS) to be trained in the Peer Challenge process and to lead Peer Challenges.

2. Process

The Peer Challenge in Leeds was led by Jon Stonehouse, Director of Children's Services, Education and Skills, City of York Council. He led a team comprising Pete Thorpe, Assistant Director, Education, North Lincolnshire Council and Roz Danks, Head of Access Services, North East Lincolnshire Council. The process was managed and coordinated by Rob Mayall (SLI Manager, Yorkshire and the Humber).

The team of three peer challengers spent a total of nine person days working in the local authority collecting evidence with which to frame their findings and drawing together their conclusions. This activity took place on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the 8th, 10th and 12th December, 2014. Prior to the Peer Challenge on-site activity, Leeds shared a wide range of information with the team to support its preparations and there were two team meetings.

The Peer Challenge process included: desk based analysis of documentation, interviews with the Portfolio holder for Children's Services and the Scrutiny Chair, the Director for Children's Services and the Chief Executive. A range of focus groups enabled a sample coverage of internal and external partners. In total, there were 16 activities with approximately 40 participants including representation from schools and governing bodies. This was a small range of activities and sample size which needs to be

noted when you are considering our conclusions. However, we were still able to develop and triangulate nearly 150 strengths and areas for development.

Initial findings were presented to the senior managers of the local authority on 12 December. In collaboration with the local authority, the team had identified five headings which provided a framework for the challenge and under which our final presentation of strengths and areas for development were grouped. The team also identified some overarching themes/issue.

3. Detailed Findings

3.1 *Overall Effectiveness of the governor support service*

Strengths

- Highly valued Governor Support Service (GSS)

A view, consistently expressed by stakeholders was of a valued, respected and effective service. The clerking service was noted for particular praise, with references to their knowledge, impartiality, skill and reliability.

‘The clerking service is fantastic’

Processes which allowed for escalation where concerns exist about the effectiveness of governance, the introduction of a skills audit and work to support the re-constitution of governing bodies were also examples shared with us of the service’s effectiveness. Mention was also made of a reduction in governor vacancies as an indicator of the impact of the GSS.

- Significantly improved GSS

A theme throughout the peer challenge was the step change in the last two years or so. This equally applied to the effectiveness of the GSS, which was seen to be more confident, with a stable workforce, a greater knowledge of schools and the ‘bigger picture’ and an integral link with the Learning and Improvement Service, making its activities more joined up with a broader school improvement agenda and creating the potential for more timely intervention.

- Diverse range of methods used to support governors

The clerking service has already been mentioned, but the governors and head teachers we spoke to value the range of

support: telephone support available, noted as specific and flexible, multi-agency workshops and to customised training and governor bulletins were all referenced.

'always there'... 'brilliant to work with'... 'support is excellent'

- Recognition of senior managers of the role of GSS in a bigger picture

The location of governor support services in the Learning and Improvement section of children's services is a powerful indicator of how integral the LA sees governors as being to school improvement. Senior managers understand this and have aspirations for a confident service which sees its place in broader corporate ambitions and provides appropriate levels of support and challenge to governing bodies to drive better outcomes for Leeds' children.

Areas for Development

- Develop and implement a clear vision of what good governance and a good GSS looks like

Notwithstanding the significant progress made in the last two years, there is a need for a clear and stated vision of what the LA expects from its governor support service and how it fits into in an emerging public service and educational landscape and this needs to be something which is better understood by GSS and its internal and external partners. There is room here for a bold approach, making the GSS more accountable for its part in the school improvement agenda, building on the increasingly positive reputation of the LA and GSS.

- Develop methods to ensure consistent engagement with governing bodies

GSS has a wide reach, but is provision consistent? Are governing bodies consistently engaged? Are all clerks enablers of bold conversations in governing bodies? (We got the impression that some were not). The LA might want to undertake an audit to check consistency and also reflect on the extent to which the LA is able to be confident that governing bodies outside the scope of the GSS (beyond the universal offer) are efficient and effective.

- Develop a clear communications strategy for GSS

The LA should consider its communication intentions – What are the messages it wishes to communicate and how should it do so?

This area for development is identified despite us recognizing as a strength the range of methods used to communicate with governors (see ‘effectiveness of governor support and training’), but we noted that some governors spoke of a lack of clarity about the distribution of specific communications; some seemed unaware of safeguarding audit activity; some communication relies on head teachers to disseminate information to their governors and some messages of change are shared by individual senior officers with individual governing bodies. Briefing sessions were described as having a poor reputation and attendance is inconsistent. Some governing bodies were reported as not fully understanding their role in relation to the city strategy. The answer to these challenges does not rest solely on a communications strategy, but it will be an important part of bringing alive a clear vision for governors (see above).

3.2 *Effectiveness of governor support and training*

Strengths

- Some provision is considered to be excellent

Governor support by the clerking service is already noted as a strength. The majority of schools purchase this service and those who do not invariably take up the offer of training activity for clerks. Conferences were also noted as excellent as was governor induction. Some of the bespoke training (for example EYFS) was noted as timely, relevant and popular. The universal offer to governors is sufficient to enable comprehensive engagement on some key issues. The local leaders of governance activity is notable.

- Visibility/access to Mayor/CX and other senior officers

Where senior officers are engaged in governor activity this is highly valued, as is the generally high visibility and accessibility of senior officers. As an example, the Lord Mayor’s thank you event was a powerful message of the important role played by governors and much appreciated.

- Diverse range of methods used to raise awareness of issues

The governor newsletter and 'one minute guides' for governors were both cited as valuable communication tools. It was noted that processes to consult governors on school expansion were robust. The LA also took a positive and proactive role in raising debate about post 16 options with a well-researched and thorough discussion document to stimulate debate amongst schools and governing bodies, (*Post 16 Learning in Leeds 2014 – 2020*)

Areas for Development

- Engage governors in debate and dialogue to build capacity

Much of the training described to us enabled knowledge to be shared. There is a place for this, but the development of more open, enquiring and challenging governors might in part be facilitated by learning and development activities which encourage engagement, debate and dialogue.

- Ensure consistent governor engagement in safeguarding audit activity

Although our sample of governors was small, it was of some concern that they were unaware of the city wide safeguarding audit activity. Their lack of awareness may not be representative, but it would be worth exploring this more thoroughly. The LA might also wish to consider introducing an expectation that governing bodies sign off the annual safeguarding audit.

- Consider how to (re)engage governors in determining/designing learning and development solutions

Governors reported that they had previously been involved in the planning of governor conferences, but this is no longer the case. Re-engagement could lead to a more relevant agenda and increase ownership of learning and development activity. Governors also lamented the loss of localised 'wedge' based governor briefings for a more cost efficient but less valued, central briefings. The LA might want to reflect on re-establishing these local meetings.

- Consider further senior officer engagement with all governing bodies on key issues

Some governors described the added value that senior officers had brought when engaged with governing bodies (usually when

the governing body/school was facing significant challenge) Whilst it would be clearly unsustainable for senior officers to be represented on all governing bodies, there would be a real value in exploring the possibility of heightened senior officer engagement on an annual basis – this might be with targeted governing bodies, or through governor briefings. This could aid a consistent dissemination of key messages – perhaps about a role for governors as part of a vision for Leeds.

- Consider the value and location of the BEM governor network

Initial briefing information about this peer challenge made no reference to the BEM governor network. When we did hear about it, there was a vagueness about how it fitted with a broader strategy for the development of governors/governance. The LA might wish to consider what evidence there is of the BEM Network adding value and if it does, how might its activities be made more coherent.

3.3 *Methods for monitoring the effectiveness of governance*

Strengths

- There is a range of protective factors which means that the LA has intelligence about the effectiveness of governing bodies

A range of protective factors was described to us which should provide some confidence that the LA is well-informed about the effectiveness of governor activity. These include: coverage of clerking (the vast majority of schools), Senior Officers on Trust Boards of Academy chains and mature partnership arrangements between the LA and schools. In our conversations with governors and head teachers this view was reinforced, and extended to embrace the appropriateness of governor activity, particularly in the context of safeguarding. We heard of an insistence that all staff are up to date with training on safeguarding; safeguarding audits being led by an LA Officer; a culture of head teachers having an open relationship with the LA, making them more likely to share any concerns about a governing body.

- Arrangements for reconstitution are effective

Work to support the reconstitution of governing bodies, led by the Governor Support Service was noted as timely and effective.

- Examples of innovation in capacity building

Leeds has taken an innovative approach to building a core group of governors that might be deployed across schools and which could lead on specific activities such as external reviews of governance. The identification, training and deployment of these 'Local Leaders of Governance' has considerable potential for enhancing the overarching approach to school improvement. However, from the evidence received it was not yet possible to reach a conclusion on the impact of LLGs to date.

- School challenge and intervention has become far more formal and focused in the last two years

Headteachers and governors reported that they valued the emergence of a more focussed and robust school improvement approach, which uses challenge to good effect. The relationships between school improvement and schools are strong enough to enable this more robust approach and the intelligence from a variety of sources including half termly challenge meetings helps to ensure timely and well informed conversations, with a clear focus on improvement. IEBs have been used effectively.

- Examples of effective brokerage of school to school support

One primary governor spoke of the effectiveness of a service level agreement between her school and another. This was an arrangement brokered by the LA.

Areas for Development

- There is a need for a consistent understanding of effective governance – of schools and in the context of the Leeds ambition

This point has been partly addressed in the 'overall effectiveness' section. A clear and shared understanding of what 'good governance' looks like, and how, in Leeds, this plays its part in broader city aspirations, would provide clarity for governors and the broader system. It would provide a benchmark against which governing bodies could be reviewed, for example, bringing a greater objectivity to the RAG ratings of governing bodies which feeds into School Review group meetings. It would also form an aspiration to which governors could commit.

- Develop the debate with governors on sector-led system

It was reported that governing bodies are not generally engaging in debate on school to school support and new partnership possibilities. As the landscape changes and a self-improving

school system emerges, it is important that governors are engaged in reflecting on the potential of sector led developments. You may wish to consider whether this issue and that of a clearly stated LA vision for governance might usefully form part of a potentially re-vitalised set of governor network meetings.

- Sustain and further systemise the challenge to schools, including governance.

We identified as a strength the more focussed and challenging role played by the LA in its dialogue with schools, but we think this is a platform on which further building might take place. The LA might want to increase the intensity of challenge and ensure that the challenge is consistent across all Officers and all teams (including the Governor Support Service and that it is uniformly informed by a range of intelligence.

3.4 *Role of Members/Scrutiny and its effectiveness*

Strengths

- Members have high visibility

The high visibility of members is a powerful symbol of a Council commitment to school improvement – a demonstration that it matters. We heard of neighbourhood councillor involvement in NEET activity and of Members chairing various governance groups and also chairing groups such as the Governor network.

- Members provide challenge

There was a recognition in our conversations with head teachers, governors and Officers that challenge comes from Members as well as officers – the Lead Member for Children’s Services provides well informed and appropriate levels of challenge and support and challenge in Scrutiny is strong(see next points). We also noted good examples of briefing sessions for members on specific topics, which ensures they remain current in their awareness of issues.

- Strong Member and school engagement in scrutiny

Scrutiny has strong member engagement and is broad and inclusive in its membership ensuring a wide range of perspectives are brought to bear on its activities. We were told that a significant number of scrutiny members are also school governors. This would give the opportunity to address the first bullet point under areas for development below.

- Strong Scrutiny programme of activity

The Scrutiny forward plan demonstrates its ambitions to fulfil a wide and challenging role.

Scrutiny is alive to the emerging educational landscape, producing a strong, comprehensive and challenging report in September 2013 on sector led improvement and especially teaching school alliances.

Areas for Development

- Use the intelligence from scrutiny to inform the system

We were unsure of the degree to which scrutiny reports and activity genuinely informs the system. The quality of those reports we saw was good and would usefully prompt debate in Governor Networks as well as individual governing bodies.

- Capitalise on the Scrutiny to consider a broader range of activity

We have commented on a strong programme of activity for Scrutiny, but did not see activity relating to school admissions; in year mobility; fair access and pupil place planning and it may be appropriate to encourage the inclusion of these topics in future work programmes.

3.5 *Overarching governance within a diverse school system*

Strengths

- Range of governance: increased emphasis on partnership, school ownership, shared accountability

Leeds is a big city, with a large number of schools and a complex set of governance and partnership arrangements. Boundaries are not always co-terminous and there seems to be some overlap across activity. However, the arrangements seem to work. School clusters in particular are highly valued and have been a powerful vehicle for engaging schools in a broader preventive agenda. Clusters have encouraged partnership working and we heard examples of this. Clusters have a degree of autonomy and financial freedom which has encouraged ownership of the agenda. Academies feel part of these arrangements.

- Methodologies for building consensus are valued

There is a recognition of the need to build consensus from the ground up. There is a strong model and methodology for consultation, (examples shared included: stakeholder engagement around pupil place planning and a multi-agency approach to prepare for the Children and Families Act). Formal structures such as the Primary Forum and head teacher briefings provide opportunities for head teachers to be involved in shaping the development of education in Leeds.

- Significant rebuilding and renegotiation of relationship with schools over the past two years

We were consistently told of the positive changes in the relationship between the LA and schools over the last two years. This re-building (and re-stating) of relationships has been very effective. Schools, including academies, spoke highly of the nature and quality of the relationship they enjoyed with the LA and an openness which enabled robust dialogue where necessary. Headteachers reported that the LA was confident in tackling under performance, whilst recognizing the need to build consensus around a more sector led model.

- The council ambition for Leeds is well recognised

All those we spoke to were aware of the council's aspirations and ambitions, including those for social, economic and environmental regeneration; the 'obsessions' were well known. It was reported that these ambitions were widely understood. The engagement and visibility of the Chief Executive with secondary headteachers and principals to explain and discuss Leeds' overarching ambitions was appreciated.

- Sound foundations for the emerging role of the local authority

The explicit commitment of children's service to restorative approaches and outcomes based accountability, coupled with a maturing relationship between the LA and schools creates a solid foundation for the co-production of a system which supports itself, is collegiate and challenging and in which improvement is driven relentlessly.

Areas for development

- Build even greater consensus from the ground up

Already a strength – but the area for development is about expanding and accelerating those activities which encourage broader ownership of an agenda. Are there other activities that

lend themselves to a restorative approach? Are there any current activities which are not being addressed collaboratively, but should be?

- Develop an overarching communications approach

The development of an overarching communications strategy has already been mentioned in an earlier section. A strategy can build on what works and make it more consistent across the system. Attention needs to be given to internal as well as partners communications. For example, not all staff understand how governance works across the system. A communications strategy can articulate and 'operationalise' the vision and strategy and can bring the 'obsessions' alive for ALL partners.

- Bring vision and strategy alive by engaging others in its further development

The engagement of partners in the development of vision would be a further opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to restorative approaches and the process would encourage vision and strategy which is more informed, has greater ownership and is better understood.

- Make obsessions meaningful to all

Everyone we spoke to could rehearse the 'ambitions', but some struggled to immediately see their relevance. Perhaps there needs to be some reflection on the 'obsessions' and whether they remain fit for purpose, speak to all partners, need expanding or extending. This would be a useful debate and could, through its methodology, be a further opportunity to apply restorative approaches with schools and governing bodies.

- Continue to invest in nurturing the effectiveness of cluster arrangements and partnerships

Clusters are strong, but they were variously also described as inconsistent, have developed their own ways of working which may not always be efficient, isolated from each other and with individual governance arrangements. This variety may in part be important (local ownership), but clusters might welcome a framework within which to operate and perhaps would benefit from some sharing of best/interesting practice across the clusters.

- Articulate the LA role in the new and emerging landscape

We think you could be more confident and consistent in articulating your role within the emerging education system: eg facilitator, enabler, honest broker. The articulation should include a clear view of the LA's role in relation to all Leeds' children and how this fits into a broader strategic vision for the city.

3.6 *Overarching Themes and Issues*

This section draws together some of the recurring themes and messages within this letter:

- Be clear, confident and bold

Your relationship with schools is strong. They have responded well to an LA which is more professional and challenging and appreciate the way in which you engage with them. This is a strong foundation on which to build. You might now be more explicit about your aspirations and more confident in their pursuit.

- Meaningful engagement

Schools and governing bodies have welcomed a more inclusive, restorative approach, but you should extend this and be more consistent in your application of these ways of working.

- Focus on better partnerships rather than better structures

Whilst we have identified the complexity of current partnership structures and a need to pay attention to how some of the structures might be more efficient and effective, we do not think you should become pre occupied with structures – it is the effectiveness of partnerships that matter.

- Governors matter

You need to demonstrate through your actions that governors have a key role to play in helping Leeds achieve its ambitions for children. They need to have a clear understanding of their role and the expectations you have of them and be helped, through learning and development activity and support and challenge to fulfil this potential.

4. **Next Steps**

You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you incorporate the team's findings into your improvement plans.

It is important that this letter describes accurately what we have observed and analysed and that it provides you with an appropriate summary to facilitate change. If this letter contains any factual inaccuracies, please do not hesitate to contact me and amendments will be made as appropriate. If you have any concerns or comments about the analysis or recommendations, do not hesitate to contact me in the first instance. If we are unable to resolve any issues, there is a mechanism for escalating concerns, which would normally be to the Chair of the SLI Executive group. A sub group of the SLI Executive will consider any concerns you may have.

Once again, thank you for agreeing to receive a Peer Challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely



Jon Stonehouse
Lead DCS for Peer Challenge in Leeds