

October 2016

Dear John

**CHILDREN’S SERVICES PEER CHALLENGE: WAKEFIELD OCTBER 2016**

Thank you for taking part in the twenty-fifth Children’s Services Peer Challenge activity in the region. You asked us to look at your work in relation to the partnership’s preparedness for the new Special Educational Needs Inspection Framework and more specifically:

* local agencies planning and coordinating their work to assess need and provide necessary support
* a critical look at your plans for developing short breaks (an area of current focus in Wakefield)
* SEN support in schools

Our feedback in this letter cross references to these areas of activity, and is organised under the headings above.

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 letter will assist you in your on-going improvement.

# **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.

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. Peer challengers have either undertaken regional training or are LGA accredited peer reviewers.

**2. Process**

The Peer Challenge in Wakefield was provided by a team led by Jayne Ludlam, Executive Director, Children Young People and Families, Sheffield City Council; Jane Le Sage, Assistant Director, Inclusion, North Yorkshire County Council; Julie Killey, Service Manager, Commissioning, Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council and, on Day 2, Emma Royle, Senior Commissioning Manager, Children’s Services, Rotherham CCG. The process was managed and coordinated by Rob Mayall (SLI Manager, Yorkshire and the Humber).

The team spent two days working in the Local Authority collecting evidence with which to frame their findings and then drew together and presented their conclusions on day three of the Challenge. This activity took place on Monday 10th October, Tuesday 11th October and Friday 14th October. Prior to the on-site activity, colleagues in Wakefield shared a wide range of information with the team to support its preparations and co-produced a timetable which ensured that the team was able to meet an appropriate range of colleagues and partners.

As well as a desk–based analysis of documentation, the Peer Challenge process included a wide range of on and off-site activities, which gave us the chance to meet nearly 150 people. These activities included, visits, observations, interviews and focus groups. We met officers at all levels within children’s and adult services, health service commissioners and providers, senior elected members, Councillors, parents, children and a number of other partners.

As a result of this activity we identified over 180 strengths and areas for consideration, which were refined and matched against the scope of the Challenge, plus a ‘headline’ strengths and areas for consideration section:

It is important to note that:

* We can only report on what we saw and read – and this was inevitably limited to what it is possible to achieve in a two day period.
* Much of what we have identified will be familiar to you – and this was confirmed as we made our presentation on 13th October.

# **3. Detailed Findings**

**3.1.1**  **Headline Strengths**

* Wakefield Council is universally seen as being a champion of inclusion- in words and actions. In our conversations with staff and partners there was a consistent recognition of the Council’s strong ambitions and deep commitment to inclusion. This is in part because of a strong narrative but is also amply demonstrated in actions.
* Strong political and senior officer commitment to SEND. This was consistent across Children’s and Adult Lead Members, the DCS and senior officers. We noted a professional commitment and something deeper – a passion for better outcomes for SEND children and young people.
* Excellent progress in relation to implementing the SEND reforms. We read, heard about and saw numerous examples of the significant progress made in relation to SEND reforms, building on the commitment and passion already embedded in your approach and actions.
* Wakefield is very self-aware and has identified the key areas that require further development. This came across strongly and we were particularly impressed with the honest, analytical and reflective self-assessment documentation, which we see as a model for others.
* Some examples of strong partnership working, which is essential to successful reform implementation. The partnerships we noted included those internal to the council: Adult and Children’s Services; work within and across strategic partnerships: Health and Wellbeing Board/ the Children’s Trust / Future in Mind as well as within the governance arrangements of the SEND Transformation Board itself.
* A system-wide passion and ambition at all levels to work creatively to improve outcomes for children and young people. We were struck, in our conversations and observations of practice by the level of commitment shown across partners and at all levels to securing the best for children
* A phrase we heard and would concur with based on our activity is

*‘People in Wakefield care’*

**3.1.2 Headline Areas for Consideration**

* Build on the good practice in the engagement of health in the planning and review of individual children and young people. We were impressed with the engagement of health in early years activities but heard that this engagement is not always so strong or consistent as children get older.
* Develop stronger relationships with and between schools. Continue to build on the good work and good relationships with many schools, but recognising the need for continued focus, energy and creativity and perhaps an openness to new types of relationships with and between schools including strengthening school to school support in order to secure inclusive approaches and better outcomes.

* Maximise the potential of parents in the SEND agenda. We met passionate and committed parents and noted that parent groups were demonstrating enthusiasm and innovation in their thinking – ‘Walk a Day in My Shoes’ is a good example of this. Parent groups could also perhaps attract resourcing not available to public bodies and could do even more to contribute to the SEND agenda with appropriate freedoms, support and encouragement.
* Communication needs to be planned and systematic in response to the pace of change. We noted that there was not a consistency of understanding across those we met about the progress being made in relation to SEND and the detail of vision, policy and processes. This sort of inconsistent understanding can affect coherence, progression of ideas and consistency of service for children and young people. A planned communication strategy, customised to audience with a methodical implementation strategy, will pay dividends.
* Formalise and communicate a clear vision and strategy for short breaks. You have identified short breaks as a key area of focus, and rightly so. A previous system, has been reviewed and re-designed. It would help the staff and partners if this emerging approach was expressed within the context of a vision, a set of aspirations and a clear implementation plan.
* Immediate action needs to be taken to address excessive waiting times for autism assessment, CAMHs provision and short break. You are aware of this issue, which is not confined to Wakefield, and are developing, through discussions with partners, plans to respond. These plans need to be monitored and reviewed at operational and strategic level through your appropriate partnership governance mechanism.

**3.2 The partnership’s preparedness for the new Special Educational Needs Inspection Framework**

**Strengths**

* Performance across national KPIs is strong and often significantly above the national average. Examples of this would be the timeliness of Plans (92% compared with 59% England); Transfer reviews (23.5% compared with 18.2% England). The proportion of new EHC Plans issued within 20 weeks is particularly high compared with neighbours and national performance. A high proportion of parents and carers are satisfied with the support they receive.
* The processes and procedures around EHCPs are extremely effective. The weekly SEND Panel works well and meets at a frequency to secure prompt and efficient decision making. We heard about and observed multi-agency decision making at Panels and heard about partnership working to support the needs of individuals. We heard that EHCP processes are maturing and that the content is becoming more outcome focussed. In our observation of a panel meeting, the child was at the heart and his voice was instrumental in the decision making process. My Support Plans are recognised as providing high quality information which facilitates EHCP planning. A wide range of partners described their understanding of MY Support Plans.
* A proactive approach to workforce development including parents. There is an extensive training programme with high levels of take up (an example being SENCO engagement in recent training) and good feedback from participants on the availability and quality of training. The range of workshops and training for parents is good and is described in a calendar of information about training opportunities. We were particularly impressed with ‘Walk a Day in My Shoes’ (already mentioned, above), a training programme developed by parents, delivered by parents and for parents.
* Ambitious plans are emerging to better prepare young people for adulthood. You are being positive and creative in your approach: in the process of recruiting 2.5 adult services workers to work in the children’s team supporting transitions – bringing with them a different perspective and an insight into the personalisation agenda; youth services offer support to disabled young people up to the age of 25yrs; there is strong post 16 provision which is responsive to needs and at a strategic level, adult services colleagues play a role on the SEND Board and chair the personalisation work stream.
* Individual relationships with parents are strong. There is some good individual work with parents to co-produce My Support Plans and EHCPs. Parents themselves say that they have more of a say and feel children are more at the centre of decisions since the reforms. The low level of tribunals is one indicator of a system that engages parents and works with them to secure mutually agreed and supported outcomes.
* Evidence of some good outcomes for children and young people with SEND. GCSE performance for statemented pupils is in Quartile A, showing as significantly better than regional, statistical neighbour and national average AND on an upward trajectory. The percentage of young people with SEN in Employment Education and Training is also better than region/statistical neighbour and national performance. There are a strong range of supported employment opportunities.
* Clear governance arrangements for SEND. The SEND Transformation Programme Board is positioned in a way to enable it to lock into broader systems of governance, such as the LSCB, the Health and Wellbeing Board and Community Safety Partnership. The system is also supportive of the children’s agenda with, for example, the West Yorkshire STP having ‘children’ as one of its 5 key priorities. SEND governance is integral rather than independent of the broader children’s system. The Board is inclusive and has a series of active work streams which drive forward business but also enable the active engagement of partners.

**Areas for consideration**

* Insufficient evidence of the strategic voice of children and young people. Although we heard about and observed children’s voice in individual conversations and engagements, we were not provided with or told about how children’s voice is captured and utilised at a strategic level. Your self-assessment recognises the need to further develop youth voice, so this, in common with several of our identified areas for consideration, is an area you have already acknowledged and are addressing.
* Joint commissioning is not yet sufficiently embedded at a strategic level. You recognise this as an area for development and have planned a joint commissioning workshop in the next few weeks which will review progress and work towards a joint commissioning strategy. This workshop, we understand, has wide partner engagement including schools. Significant pressures on the system indicate that this is a priority area and the workshop should be used to clarify, collectively, what you are going to do, with the resources you have to achieve the outcomes you desire.
* Personal budgets is an area requiring further expansion. We understand that take up of personal budgets as direct payments is low and this might in part be linked to how parents are informed about the notion of personal budgets and their potential and the ways in which they are engaged to explore personal budget possibilities. There is a section on the EHCP which relates to personal budgets, so you might want to work with staff who support completion of EHCPs to explore how this section might best be addressed in order to drive forward personalisation.
* Arrangements for transitions to adult services need time to develop and embed. This would be a challenge that could be levelled at most local authorities. You have already made some progress in this area (a political commitment to developing links across transitions; SEND work stream on transitions and also the allocation of adult social work resource to the children’s SEN team), but there is more to be done to develop and implement a coherent and consistent approach to transitions for all young people with SEND. Specific areas we identified included: further strengthening employment opportunities; make clearer to providers and families your 18+ funding arrangements; implement and evaluate your plans to improve transition arrangements in schools; improve transition in health services including ensuring specifications are robust in this area and use data to inform Health and Social Care commissioning plans
* All services should consider their criteria against the 0-25 agenda for SEND. We have noted good examples of services extending SEND activity to age 25 (Youth Services), but there needs to be a consideration across all services about the degree to which they might extend activity and this then needs to be made clear through the Local Offer.
* Develop creative solutions to address sustainability. The resourcing for SEND may not be sustainable in the long term, which suggests a need to reflect, across the partnership and sooner rather than later, on future proofing outcomes, through more cost efficient approaches, the securing of resources through different routes (for example, there may be potential for parent groups to secure resources not available to public sector bodies), re-design of services to match what may be a reducing funding envelope.
* Develop effective processes in schools to identify those at risk of exclusion and take pro-active steps with partners to intervene early. You told us that permanent exclusions and fixed term exclusions for SEND are increasing and we heard reports that some schools are struggling to respond to the needs of pupils with SEND in their secondary years. There is an urgent need to work with all schools to identify and replicate inclusive practice and develop solutions which enable more children with SEND to have fewer interruptions to their learning. Perhaps this is even more fundamental, and requires some work with schools to develop (or re-visit?) a genuinely owned vision for inclusion for all children in Wakefield.

**3.3**   **Local agencies planning and coordinating their work to assess need and provide necessary support**

**Strengths**

* Evidence of strong partner engagement in SEND work streams. Partners are well represented on the various work streams. Adult Services lead a work stream and health colleagues are visible, demonstrating a shared ownership of the SEND agenda.
* The SEND Transformation Board is linked into broader systems of governance. There are links between and across the various strategic boards and the Transformation Board is central in the broader system (already mentioned earlier in this letter).
* Some good examples of joint commissioning activity for individual children was evidenced both observing the EHC panel,(between Children’s and Adults), and in the complex care panel meeting
* Some strong and collaborative voluntary sector activity. The work of Barnardo’s in the provision of advocacy services, which are well respected and the work of WESAIL are of particular note. WESAIL is reported by parents as the ‘go to’ place for information and advice and staff at WESAIL were reported by parents as being supportive.
* We observed good joint practice in meeting the needs of children with SEND. The work we observed in EHCPs was a demonstration of this, with several services demonstrating to each other and to parents and children a ‘wrap around’ set of inter-connected services. Portage services and those in receipt of portage described multi-agency reviews on a regular basis which enabled a check of how each was contributing to meeting a child’s needs and how further progress could be made.
* There is a culture of ‘no wrong door’ Rather than parents being referred, they are supported. We heard examples of individuals and agencies identifying need which they themselves could not meet and rather than referring a parent elsewhere, took some responsibility for either guiding the parent through the system or seeking answers from elsewhere on behalf of the parent.
* Good joined up working in early years. Early years partnerships across the system are strong, with good engagement of partners in early years reviews. The early years team described their visits to all 75 early years settings on an annual basis, reviewing activity and need and gathering data through a series of standard questions. We were impressed with the potential of this data, not yet realised, which if collated and analysed could provide a rich source of intelligence.

**Areas for Consideration**

* Build on the good work already commenced to further strengthen partnership with adult services in health and care. You can evidence some strong partnerships in the SEND system – health in early years for example and health partners talked of strengthening relationships over the last two years or so. However, parents and partners described a lessening of health engagement in planning processes as children became older (however, see point below). Similarly, links with adult services need further strengthening to help address the transitions agenda.

* Clarify and communicate your expectations about the engagement of partners in SEND care planning and reviewing. Responses to our questions about the engagement of partners in planning and review processes were inconsistent. Several responses indicated health engagement was less strong than it might be – but this was challenged by health colleagues, suggesting their attendance ‘when appropriate’ – which may well be the case. We also heard of the need for an improved engagement of social care. This points to a need for an explicit set of expectations about the engagement of partners, which addresses appropriate engagement rather than, necessarily, attendance. This needs to be developed and then shared with partners and parents.
* Monitor the continued engagement of partners in SEND activity at a strategic and individual level. Once a clear set of expectations about engagement in planning and review processes (see above point) has been developed, there needs to be a monitoring of engagement and then rigorous challenge where activity mismatches expectations. This also applies to partner engagement at a strategic level – on work streams and in other governance arrangements.
* Harness the support of parents at a strategic level. We were very impressed with the energy and commitment of those parents we met. We think there is untapped potential for you to draw on their support and engagement. ‘Think parent’ would be an appropriate mantra – for example, parents could usefully be involved in forthcoming joint commissioning workshops (we were surprised that they were not) and be genuine co-producers of strategy rather than consultees on an emerging or finished product. We were also unable to see a strategic mechanism for capturing the voice of parents and this should be developed, with appropriate feedback mechanisms to ensure they can see how their voice has impacted on services.
* Further develop communication within the LA and across all partners. The pace of change and development is such that it is inevitable not all change will be understood throughout the system, at the same time. Nevertheless, we feel that there is more you can do to communicate effectively. Specific examples we captured where good communication could be applied to enhance understanding were: partner awareness of My Support Plans; developing a shared understanding across professionals of short breaks and eligibility criteria and addressing parental ignorance/vagueness about the local offer, (although we also noted excellent practice with ‘Local Offer Live’).

**3.4:** **A critical look at your plans for developing short breaks**

**Strengths**

* A recognition of the need to develop your approach to short breaks. You know that this is an area for development and are investing energy in re-framing the approach and the offer. We noted a strong desire to change the current model.
* There is evidence of listening to parent carer feedback and taking action. This is evidence of an openness to change and an openness to the voice of parents. We heard about engagement with families to inform a revised short breaks statement.
* There are strong working relationships across short break providers. We saw some evidence of maximising staff to provide consistency for children and young people. We were particularly impressed with examples of staff who were already providing support for a family in one capacity also engaging in short break activity – thus providing levels of continuity across activity and relationships.

**Areas for Consideration**

* Formalise and communicate a clear vision, strategy and action plan for implementing short breaks. The transformation agenda for short breaks does not yet appear to be clearly understood across all professionals and providers.

An emerging strategy based on a needs analysis, might also include reflecting back on previous systems and checking whether elements of that (some of it was well respected by parents) can be incorporated. As part of this work consider the degree to which some short break providers need to review their current offer for up to 18 in light of the transitions agenda and whether parental choice can be enhanced by legitimising direct payments to child care providers for respite activity.

* Some families felt a lack of consultation in relation to new models for short breaks. This may, in part be an issue of communication – demonstrating that parent voice HAS had an impact on your thinking, but there may also be further opportunities to secure family voice beyond those currently utilised.

* Establish a system to enable the ongoing review of short breaks entitlement as part of the EHCP process. As family needs change so might the nature of short break provision to meet their needs. We did not see mechanisms to review short break activity which, if implemented could lead to more meaningful and sometimes more cost efficient solutions.
* Address an overly bureaucratic and risk averse approach to procurement. Current requirements for assessment for short breaks are cumbersome. We recognise a need to be consistent and to ensure the safety of provision, but this needs to be proportionate and at the moment this is getting in the way of progressing your aspirations for a simple and straightforward system which can be navigated with relative ease by families and professionals. As part of the review, consider allocating a monetary value rather than ‘hours’ in response to a personalisation agenda, and introducing direct applications from parents.

**3.5:  SEN support in schools, particularly in the context of academisation**

**Strengths**

* Special schools talked of a long history of quality relationships with the LA and partners and we observed evidence of special schools going that ‘extra mile’ to accommodate children with SEND and heard about good practice of full time nurses in special schools enabling immediate access to health care and advice.
* Many schools have good relationships with the LA. They respond well to an agenda which values inclusion. In our conversations with school practitioners and leaders, they reported how much they valued support from the early years service and its support of transitions to primary learning. Partners are working well to try and improve SEND support across all schools. Links with FE are also good and your post 16 provision is expanding and innovative.
* Schools value the opportunity to participate in the EHC panel. They appreciated the opportunity to bring a school perspective to decision making but also recognised the value of understanding decision making better and reflecting on what this might mean for their own individual and institutional practice. One school manager talked about nominating several different members of staff to attend panels because of the professional development opportunity panels offered.
* Good strong school representation at a strategic level. School engagement in broader strategic agendas such as Future in Mind is strong and schools are well represented in the governance of SEND including various work streams. We also heard that governor meetings across the area always have a SEND element.
* Strong engagement of schools in the training offer. Schools reported valuing the training offer. SENCO staff in particular have been heavily engaged in recent training activity.

**Areas for Consideration**

* Address concerns of parents around the consistency of support for SEND children. Feedback from parents to the peer challenge team and as reported by partners (WESAIL) is that their children are sometimes not receiving the support they need particularly at SEN Support level, or they may be receiving the support but the school is less effective than it might be in communicating this.
* Consider how to further develop partnerships with schools, both schools with other schools and with the local authority. When we spoke with schools, there was little evidence of a collective commitment to a self-improving school system. The ‘answers’ to inclusion and better outcomes for SEND pupils were seen to be in the relationship between the LA and schools, which we recognise is critical. We would also suggest that some of the answers might sit within the school system and the way best practice is shared across schools and how they might co-produce solutions to better outcomes for this vulnerable group of learners.
* Consider streamlining processes to enable schools to more effectively engage. Schools talked of extensive documentation and cumbersome processes. It may be that much of this is inevitable in a system which is trying to secure as rounded a picture as possible of the young people it is trying to serve. Nevertheless, there may be a case to recognise some of the challenges faced by schools (some schools expressed a concern that SENART services did not understand the current school environment) and reflect on which, if any, processes might be streamlined.
* Work with schools to develop a joint strategy to address the concerning trend of fixed term exclusions for SEND pupils. A true partnership with schools is required to address this challenge, perhaps based on a shared vision of Wakefield’s aspirations for children and young people (see final bullet point in 3.2).

**4. Summary**

You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you incorporate the team’s findings into your improvement plans. We hope that you find our reflections helpful.

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 yourself as the Chair of the SLI Executive group, but as this would be inappropriate, the concern would be escalated to the Regional Chair of ADCS, who would convene a sub group of the SLI Executive to 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



Jayne Ludlam

Lead for Peer Challenge in Wakefield