

Early Years (Speech, Language and Communication)

Peer Challenge Guidance Manual

1. Background

On 14 December 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) launched [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education](#). The plan sets an overarching ambition: no community left behind. A further four ambitions will cover the key life stages of people's education.

Ambition 1 is to close the word gap in the early years. Children with strong foundations will start school in a position to progress, but too many children still fall behind early, and it is hard to close the gaps that emerge. We need to tackle these development gaps at the earliest opportunity, particularly focussing on the key early language and literacy skills, so that all children can begin school ready to thrive.

The drivers of outcomes age five are broad, and involve a range of local services including, but not limited to early education and childcare; for example, early help, family support, public health, primary care and so on. Local authorities are not solely responsible for all of these, but sit at the heart of what a locality offers disadvantaged families, and high quality integrated services are key if we are going to make an impact on outcomes.

The Government has therefore committed £8.5m to spread best practice on improving early language outcomes. Part of this offer is the development a new programme of peer challenge and support for councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) has been commissioned by the DfE to design and deliver this peer challenge programme.

To enhance this approach further the DfE has also commissioned the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) to develop support, tools and materials that will enable councils and their partners to self-assess the progress they are making in delivering effective early years services. EIF will also be working with the early years sector to develop and share a better understanding of good practice and 'what works'.

2. Introduction

This guidance manual is designed to help build an understanding of the purpose and methodology of an Early Years peer challenge. It is not intended to be prescriptive as each challenge will have its own individual features but the steps set out in the manual provide a firm base for ensuring that each challenge can be conducted successfully.

The aim of each challenge is to help councils and their partners to reflect on the early years services they provide and improve the outcomes for children and families.

Although the short title used is an 'Early Years' peer challenge, it should be noted the underpinning focus of the challenges is on reducing gaps in speech,

language and communication outcomes in the early years, with the goal of improving school readiness and social mobility.

The manual contains guidance for everyone involved in the peer challenge and specifically for the host council and the peer challenge team.

It is important to remember that a challenge is not an inspection and should not be conducted like one by either the peer team or the host council. Rather, it is providing a critical friend approach that challenges the councils and their partners in assessing their strengths and identifying their own areas for improvement. The key purpose of the challenge is to stimulate local action about how the council and its partners can improve the outcomes for children and families.

The challenge is an interactive exercise. During the challenge the peer team will examine evidence from a number of sources. These will include:

- Introductory presentation by the local authority to give context
- Documents that outline the local area approach to early years provision
- A self-assessment prepared by the council and their partners
- Performance data
- Interviews and focus groups conducted with staff from the council, partners and other stakeholders
- Observations of practice

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

Over time the LGA will use the learning from the challenges to contribute to the developing body of good practice to be used by councils and partners in their own improvement journeys. EIF also has a role in collating good practice from the challenges and sharing this with a wider audience.

3. How long does a challenge last?

The peer team will spend four days on-site with the council and its partners. This will be preceded by an intensive period of planning, organisation and preparation particularly for the council to produce a self-assessment, the challenge timetable and the documentation, evidence and information that will be requested. The LGA will provide support and guidance through this period.

The LGA expects to have a final report submitted to the council within five weeks of the on-site phase, and often much sooner than this.

4. The challenge themes

The challenge will be structured around key themes, which are aligned to the themes in the EIF Maturity Matrix, and which the peer team will explore in detail. The key themes that have been identified are:

- Strategy
- Commissioning
- Workforce planning
- Partnership

- Leadership
- Community ownership
- Services and interventions
- Information and data
- Outcomes
- Using and generating evidence

It is not intended that the peer challenge will cover all of these themes as this would be too broad a scope for the peer team to cover in four days. The council will identify no more than **five** of themes from this list. There will also be the opportunity to include specific key lines of enquiry that the council feel are important, as long as this does not make the scope of the challenge unmanageable.

Using the EIF Maturity Matrix as a self-assessment tool will help the council and its partners to determine which themes the challenge should focus on.

Further details for each theme and the probes the peer team will explore can be found in [this link](#).

5. Basic stages in a challenge

The information in the table below sets out the basic stages in a challenge.

Stage	Time Period	Action
Set-up meeting and formal proposal, including the initial scope of the challenge	At least three months before date of challenge	Council confirms it wishes to have a challenge. LGA Children’s Programme Manager issues proposal including confirmation of any additional areas explored, dates for on-site work and team composition.
Allocation of challenge manager and support.	As soon as council confirms date for a challenge	LGA allocate challenge manager, project co-ordinator and issue guidance manual to council.
Self-Assessment planning (using the Maturity Matrix)	As soon as council confirms date for a challenge	The Council can contact EIF to provide independent support for the self- assessment process – EIF offer an online survey and facilitated multi-agency workshop
Identification of peer team	As soon as council confirms requirements	Children’s Programme Manager sources potential peer team members which are agreed with the council.
Challenge preparation	At least two months before on-site challenge	Challenge manager begins ongoing dialogue with the council to plan and prepare the challenge. During this stage the challenge manager will visit.

		The council and its partners start to collate documentation and prepare challenge timetable for on-site days.
Self-Assessment workshop (the Maturity Matrix)	4-8 weeks before the challenge	The local area develops their brief narrative self-assessment and confirms the priority areas for the challenge. Where supported by EIF this includes using an online survey and a facilitated multi-agency workshop.
Final challenge preparation	At least ten days before challenge.	Council shares the final challenge timetable, self- assessment and background documentation. The self-assessment should be a brief (3-4 side) simple narrative which gives an overview of the local Earl Years system, and links to the supporting documents which have the fuller detail. This is shared with the challenge team via a secure portal
On-site	On-site stage	Peer team work through the challenge timetable and produce final presentation. The final presentation also identifies 2-3 practice examples that would be of interest to a wider audience and invites the Council to work with EIF to prepare these as brief summaries for publication.
Post challenge	Within three weeks of on-site stage ending	Challenge manager drafts feedback report with Lead Peer and requests input from the team. Draft report undergoes LGA Quality Assurance processes and sent to host council for comment within three weeks of the challenge. (For QA please email to Richard Cooke, Liz Hodgman, CIA and PA for region) Final report (PDF) issued to councils by the challenge manager within five weeks of the on-site stage ending. Include in email DCS, RC, LH, CIA, PA and all of the peer team) Discussions held re further support. Evaluation of challenge undertaken.

6. The peer challenge team

The LGA will pull together a team to deliver each peer challenge. The team for an early years peer challenge will typically comprise the roles outlined in the table below:

Team member	Indicative number of days involvement
A director or assistant director of children's services with significant early years' experience (team leader)	Six (four days on-site plus pre-reading and report contribution)
An operational manager/practitioner with experience of early years	Five (four days on site plus pre-reading and support with final letter),
A Health manager/practitioner with experience of early years at strategic and operational level	Five (four days on site plus pre reading and support with final letter)
An education specialist with experience of early years in a range of educational settings	Five (four days on site plus pre-reading and support with final letter)
The challenge manager	Eight days (four off site, four on site)

The following points should be noted.

- 1) The above team is a 'standard team'. In practice it may be necessary to add additional team members depending on the areas to be explored, local circumstance, partnership arrangements.
- 2) EIF will also provide associates for some of the challenge teams, from a variety of professional backgrounds, but with a focus on applying evidence to practice and the whole system approach described within the Maturity Matrix.
- 3) The indicative number of days should not be exceeded without prior approval from the LGA Programme Manager (Children's Services).
- 4) In practice it has been found to be very helpful if team members specialise or lead in their own area of expertise in examining the themes.

In addition a project co-ordinator will be appointed to assist with logistical arrangements, accommodation bookings, expenses payments etc but they will not attend the on-site work.

There may also be occasions when, for the purposes of gaining first-hand experience of a peer challenge, the LGA may request the permission of a council for another LGA member of staff or prospective peer to participate. This is at no cost to the council.

Team roles, ground rules and skills required

Although they will work as a team throughout, each member of the team does have specific responsibilities and there are basic ground rules under which the team should operate. [Team responsibilities and ground rules](#)

Agreeing the peer team

The LGA will pull together a peer team to ensure that the skills, expertise and background of the team matches the council's requirements as closely as

possible. However, the council will always be consulted to ensure they have the final decision on the team make-up.

Where a team member withdraws at short notice the challenge manager will propose an alternative as soon as possible, taking into account that the availability of peers will be limited.

Document Distribution

All the information provided by the council and its partners will be uploaded to a designated group on a secure shared portal. This can only be accessed by the team, the host authority and the project co-ordinator.

7. The council and their responsibilities

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

The challenge sponsor should be a senior manager within the council (preferably the director or assistant director of children's services). The challenge needs to be agreed by the council's Chief Executive and Lead Member. The role of the challenge sponsor is to commission the challenge, ensure there is high level commitment to the process from staff and partners and agree the scope and themes for the challenge with the LGA.

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

In addition, the council should be aware of its responsibilities in agreeing to and participating in the challenge process. [Key council responsibilities](#)

8. Confidentiality, data protection and personal data

Confidentiality

Each party (council, partners, LGA, EIF and peer challenge team) will keep all confidential information belonging to other parties disclosed or obtained as a result of the relationship of the parties through the peer challenge and will not use or disclose the same, save for the purposes of the proper performance of the peer challenge or with the prior written consent of the other party.

The obligations of confidentiality will not extend to any matter which the parties can show is in, or has become, part of the public domain other than as a result of a breach of the obligations of confidentiality or was in their written records prior to the date of the peer challenge; was independently disclosed to it by a third party; or is required to be disclosed under any applicable law, or by order of a court or governmental body or other competent authority.

As can be seen in the challenge stages there are parts of the challenge that may involve team members having access to personal data. **It is vital that**

the following principles are understood by the council, partners and members of the peer team and adhered to at all times.

Data protection

The council, partners, LGA, EIF and peer team members agree that data (including personal data) as defined in the Data Protection Act 1998, relating to the processing of the peer challenge, to the extent that it is reasonably necessary in connection with the peer challenge, may:

1. be collected and held (in hard copy and computer readable form) and processed by the peer challenge team and
2. may be disclosed or transferred:
 - a. to the peer challenge team members and/or
 - b. as otherwise required or permitted by law

9. Set-up and scoping stage

The LGA Programme Manager will arrange a meeting with the director, or assistant director of children's services, and they will act as the challenge sponsor.

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

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

Communications and publicity

The purpose of a challenge is to promote learning and improved outcomes. In this context, the council should consider communications across the partnership not only to share the findings but to also engage different parts of the early years' sector in the challenge process. ['What's it all about?', example partnership briefing](#)

The final report is the property of the receiving council and is not published by the LGA, however it is expected that the council share the report with the appropriate networks and partners.

The final report will be sent to the director of children's services (DCS) and copied to the LGA Principal Adviser and Regional Children's Improvement Adviser

10. Challenge preparation

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

- Pre-challenge documentation and performance information [pre challenge documentation and information](#)
- Self-assessment document [The Maturity Matrix and guidance](#)
- On-site challenge timetable. [Challenge timetable guidance](#).
- [Example timetable](#)
- [Blank timetable template](#)
- [Data required for the challenge](#)
- [Key Lines of Enquiry Guidance](#)
- [Self Assessment Guidance](#)
- [Preparation Checklist](#)
- [What makes a successful peer challenge](#)

11. Self-assessment – the Maturity Matrix

EIF has a suite of local planning tools, called Maturity Matrices, and has created a new version to support the early years peer challenge, focused on speech, language and communication. The Matrix is a tool to help measure how advanced a local area is in creating a local system to help children in their early years to thrive and to guide planning to make this local system more effective.

The Matrix covers 4 dimensions which are important to early intervention systems: Plan; Lead; Deliver; and Evaluate. The Matrix can be used as the basis for a structured stakeholder conversation or workshop, and can also be completed online by key stakeholders in advance of a multi-agency workshop. The Matrix works best when a range of people with different experiences and perspectives take part, and when they can hear and moderate each other's contributions to build a fuller picture.

The process for using the Matrix to support development of a system self-assessment is available here [process for using the Maturity Matrix to prepare a self-assessment](#) and is triggered by a council request to EIF. The Council is not required to engage EIF in the process and can develop a local self-assessment in a different way. Information gathered by EIF as part of the self-assessment process is only collected for the purpose of supporting the local site to develop their self-assessment and is not shared by EIF with any other organisations, including the LGA.

A user guide summary of the Maturity Matrix is available here [User Guide](#).

12. On-site phase

The key features of the on-site phase are described below:

No surprises policy

This council will be provided with regular feedback on the key issues emerging during the on-site work. The team leader and challenge manager will also give the council's challenge sponsor a good understanding of what

will be presented at the final presentation. This gives the chance to resolve any outstanding issues and ensure appropriate language and wording is used. But this is not an opportunity to change the findings of the peer team.

First peer team meeting

The peer team will have its first meeting on the evening before of the challenge starts on site. Challenge manager will facilitate this meeting and it will cover introductions, familiarity with the methodology, the conduct for interviews and any initial thoughts that can be drawn from the pre reading.

Council overview presentation

The start of Day 1 should include a short presentation from the council. This should last for a maximum of 20 minutes and consist of an overview of early years provision in the area (not just early years services delivered by the council); areas of strength; areas for development and any planned key actions and priorities.

On-site interviews, focus groups and observations

This will form the main activity for the rest of days one to three of the on-site stage. The focus of the interviews will be on validation and exploration of the evidence from the self-assessment and documentation. This will lead to discussion of the interviewees understanding of strengths and areas for the development across the early years agenda.

The feedback presentation

The final phase of the on-site stage will be a feedback presentation by the peer team to the council.

There is a standard format to the feedback presentation and each member of the team will contribute to the drafting. The presentation should identify good practice and suggestions for improvement, as well as the practice examples that the team think would be of wider interest.

13. The written feedback

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

- an executive summary of the key issues
- strengths and areas for further development identified throughout the process
- recommendations based on the findings and which will help the council and their partners to improve early years provision for children and families.

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

14. Follow up activity

Following the peer challenge and production of the final report the LGA Programme Manager will liaise with the council to agree any next steps and follow up activity. This might include:

- Liaison with EIF on the practice examples suggested in the final presentation. This would involve remote drafting of 1-3 very short summaries, agreed with the local site, which are then published to an online EIF Hub focused on local transformation of maternity and early years' services, and used to support other sites using the Maturity Matrix and undertaking the peer challenge process.
- Participation in an 'end of wave' good practice learning / sharing event which brings together stakeholders from across sites involved in each wave of challenges.
- LGA Children's Improvement Advisor to provide to broker specific support to develop and deliver improvement plans
- EIF can provide further bespoke post challenge support to a limited number of sites that wish to further explore how the Maturity Matrix and evidence-base can inform their approach.
- A follow-up visit – two members of the peer team return for a two day visit, 12 months after the challenge, to assess progress in delivering change and improvement.