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Debbie Barnes, Interim Director of Children's Services
Cllr Patricia Bradwell, Portfolio Holder Children's Services
Lincolnshire County Council
County Offices
Newland
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18 July 2012

Dear Debbie and Cllr Bradwell,

Peer Challenge Review: Lincolnshire Children's Services

This letter summarises the findings of the Peer Challenge Review in Lincolnshire County Council on July 9-11th 2012. I would be grateful if you would convey the thanks of the whole team to your staff, partners and service users for the way in which they made us welcome and gave of their time. I am also grateful for the materials which were provided to enable us to reach our views.

The focus was to examine effectiveness of strategies and partnerships in narrowing the gap between:

- Children eligible for FSM and their peers across all education phases from early years to 19 years
- Children who have special educational needs/a disability and their peers
- Identified vulnerable groups and their peers.

The team consisted of Cllr David Mellen (Nottingham City Council), Lesley Hagger (Leicestershire County Council), Tim O'Neill (Nottingham City Council), John Slater (Nottinghamshire County Council) and myself, supported by Daniel Routledge (SDSA).

External evaluators, including Ofsted, judge the Department to be outstanding overall and to have good and outstanding services. During the course of this short review, we have seen strong evidence that this remains the case. The challenge which we believe Lincolnshire faces now and into the future, is to maintain excellence in a context of changed officer leadership and the likelihood of further budget reductions.

Strengths

Staff and partners showed strong commitment to their work with children and young people. There is a keen focus upon the needs of individual children. Clear evidence of this emerged, for example, in interviews with staff, partners and service users in Fostering, Adoption, Looked After Children and Leaving Care services. Work around ensuring that young people, and particularly the most disadvantaged, have a say in the nature of the services they receive is well-developed and helps match service delivery to individual need. Examples include:

- The short breaks provision for children with a disability is of high quality and makes positive impact upon the lives of the children and their families
- In the case of Looked After Children, not only is there effective tracking of their placements and school progress, but arrangements are in place to ensure that children can sustain hobbies and interests in the transition from fostering to adoption.

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- The Young Carers Partnership is led by young people and services are flexing to respond to their needs and wishes. For example, there is a young carers ID card which identifies them as the primary carer.

Collaborative partnership working was also well evidenced. For example, the work with Team Around the Child, Families Working Together, use of the children's centres as a shared hub and partnership work with Barnardos to support Looked After Children all involve a range of professionals working collaboratively and to good effect. The commissioning of a broad range of children's services is a strength. For example, effective commissioning of large numbers of voluntary and community services (VCS) contracts delivers a diverse range of children and young people and family services. The joint evaluation framework which ensures high quality and value for money services is particularly noteworthy.

There is a strong relationship between the Department's commissioning arrangements and CAHMS. This has resulted in a process of rapid referral and, in several cases, prevented further deterioration in young people's mental health so that there is a reduced need for specialist CAHMS services.

The Department benefits from strong and integrated political leadership which can be seen with the collaboration between Lead Members for health and children around the Health and Wellbeing board in order to profile appropriately the priorities for children within the community health agenda.

A striking feature of the provision in Lincolnshire is the value for money returns in several key services. For example, the extraordinarily low spend on out of county placements for children in social care releases funds that are spent creatively within Lincolnshire. The per student costs of the County's Pupil Referral Unit provision, both within the Learning Centres and through its purchased alternative provision for older students, known as Solutions4, again are exceptionally low and yet outcomes are beyond those typically achieved either nationally or by statistical neighbours.

Opportunities

The appointment of a new Director of Children's Services provides an opportunity for a refocusing and emphasis upon closing the gap. Targeting of the resources of staff, partners and the Department's budget on narrowing the gap will inevitably impact on other priorities. There is some tension between the desire to improve outcomes for all young people with the need to focus resource upon those whose need is greatest. This dilemma is likely to increase as resources available in all parts of the public sector become more scarce. The required focus to guarantee sufficient resource into the future will necessitate political commitment.

Any risks associated with uncertainty of staffing of the senior leadership team can now be mitigated and the senior team arrangements can be consolidated. The newly constituted team will be able to lead the Department in giving great emphasis to the priority to close the gap. Strong political leadership should enable children's needs to be appropriately profiled within the new working relationships between the Children's Trust and the Health and Wellbeing Board.

While the high quality work of teams will certainly contribute to closing the gap, the shared narrative about the nature of the challenge and its central importance was not always reflected back fully by all colleagues. There is opportunity through the revised Early Intervention Strategy, which is likely to include the strategy for closing the gap, to give greater emphasis to the priority. Defining what exactly is meant by the gaps and the groups affected by it within a specific Lincolnshire context will be important. Senior politicians and officers can then select from the range of approaches currently being used those which prove to be the most effective with the targeted groups.

An example of the specific Lincolnshire context arises in the County's secondary schooling arrangements. All young people need to benefit from attending secondary schools which provide high quality education which engages all students and enables them to fulfil their potential. However, the number of children who are entitled to free school meals who are being educated in grammar schools is disproportionately low in comparison with their peers. Primary schools could be encouraged, particularly through the CfBT Professional Educational Advisers, to use resources which will be available through the Pupil Premium to make specific preparation for the 11-plus tests. If this were to be successful it would not only result in narrowing the gap significantly, it could allow some young people to break radically from the cycle of deprivation into which they may be otherwise locked.

CfBT is also about to appoint a new director. Again, this provides an opportunity to re-emphasise the centrality of this work of closing the gap, both to CfBT staff and those whom they manage on behalf of the Department. Such a succession opportunity encourages consideration to be given to how influence can be sustained within schools, given the significantly changing landscape as many, particularly secondary schools, attain academy status and all become more autonomous. Persuading all schools and academies to place an appropriate emphasis on vulnerable groups, which is in line with the new Ofsted inspection framework, is a key challenge for Departmental and CfBT officers.

The development of provision for children with SEND, building on the SEND review, and bringing provision into line with the requirements of the SEN Green Paper will require collaborative work between the Department, CfBT and schools and academies.

Lincolnshire has in place a number of programmes and approaches which will translate well into the Troubled Families agenda. For example, the Families Working Together and Team Around the Child approaches are multi-agency, locality-based and command strong political and partnership support. The Department should seek to adapt such programmes to make them scalable for the Troubled Families initiative, rather than develop new approaches. Similar development work should also be undertaken in partnership work with the Health Service. For example, a strategy to seek to replicate the relative ease of access and appropriate speed of response shown by CAMHS at Tier 2 to more specialist provision would contribute positively to the mental health of some of the most vulnerable young people.

An opportunity exists with the advent of the new Health and Wellbeing Board and transfer of Public Health to tackle health inequalities, building on the strong foundation already in place. The recent national learning set for Health and Wellbeing Boards recommended a range of strategic questions and challenges for local Health and Wellbeing Boards, which apply to Lincolnshire. Working through these questions and challenges with the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership taking the lead, would provide a useful stock take of health and wellbeing arrangements for children and young people in the County and could serve to confirm current priorities or identify new areas for development. The likely new Health Outcomes Strategy for Children and Young People (due to be published in the Autumn of 2012) offers a further opportunity to focus on local priorities to close gaps in health and wellbeing outcomes.

Many thanks again to you and all your colleagues. All the team members feel that we will be taking significant learning back into our own Authorities as a result of the review. I hope that colleagues involved in Lincolnshire continue to feel that the process has been worthwhile and has contributed purposefully to our work for the children, young people and families we serve.

Yours sincerely,



Anthony May
Corporate Director for Children, Families and Cultural Services