

James Winterbottom
Director of Children's Services
Wigan Council
Wigan New Town Hall
Library Street
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July 2018

Dear James,

**WIGAN COUNCIL
EARLY YEARS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY PILOT PEER REVIEW**

On behalf of the team I would like to thank Wigan Council for taking part in the pilot Early Years and Social Mobility Peer Review programme.

We are grateful to the many staff members who assisted in the preparation and implementation of the peer review. All the people we met were very welcoming and demonstrated a willingness to use the peer review as an opportunity for learning and improvement. We recognise that many of these people made themselves readily available to us at short notice and we thank them for their flexibility.

As agreed, this report is designed to provide you with a synopsis of the points contained in our feedback meetings during the on-site period and in our final presentation.

Background

Independent external evaluation and feedback from the sector has endorsed peer review 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. The Early Years Social Mobility peer review programme is part of this sector-led approach in which local government takes responsibility for its own improvement.

On the 12th December, 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) launched *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education*. Over the course of five ambitions the DfE social mobility

action plan sets an overarching vision of no community left behind. Ambition One is to close the word gap in the early years. Strong foundations in early years enable children to start school in a position to progress. Gaps in development are most effectively tackled at the earliest opportunity, focussing on key early language and literacy skills, so that all children can begin school ready to thrive.

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 is working with the Local Government Association (LGA) to develop the sector led improvement offer. The first phase of the programme is for the LGA to pilot an Early Years peer review in three local authorities during the summer of 2018. Wigan Council expressed an interest in being a part of the pilot phase and in July 2018 undertook the first of the three pilot Early Years peer reviews.

The review team was developed specifically to address the three primary areas of focus highlighted in the scoping meeting by Wigan 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 review manager and office based LGA business support.

Some work was undertaken prior to the team's visit. The peer review team studied a range of documents, strategies, plans, policies and performance information supplied in advance by Wigan Council. The council also produced, and forwarded a self-assessment of strengths and potential areas for improvement.

The peer team were on site in Wigan from the 10th to the 12th July 2018. During that time, they met with families, visited early years and child care settings, observed meetings and interviewed individuals and focus groups from across the partnership.

The LGA team were strongly of the view that the process undertaken was robust and so enabled key conclusions to be reached. These messages were shared verbally with senior leaders during the fieldwork stage and presented to an invited audience at the conclusion of the on-site period.

Review overview

In this report, we set out positive observations and areas for consideration in relation to your primary areas of focus.

You identified three primary areas of focus for the peer review that were agreed at the beginning of the scoping process.

- **Integration and Partnership**
- **Early years processes, access, quality of education services**
- **Speech and Language**

SEND was initially included in your primary areas of focus but was removed (as a primary focus) because of a very recent SEND inspection. You asked the team to include SEND when relevant as part of the overall review focus and our findings are included below.

The team's findings are set out as assets (following the language used by you in The Deal) and areas for consideration.

Summary of key messages from the review

We were impressed by the range of effective early years practice that we saw. We found enthusiastic and dedicated staff who talked about their services with passion. Staff across all settings are clearly working hard to reach out to the most vulnerable families and to be as inclusive as possible.

The enthusiasm we found at the frontline was underpinned and facilitated by a clear strategic vision and focus on where you want to be, both as a Council and in terms of your Early Years offer to local families. There has been a significant reformulation of the vision for Wigan in the recent past. The Deal that has been developed has established a positive culture and language to reframe Early Years service delivery and allowed staff to be creative and innovate. These innovations were evidence based and often the subject of research with linked academic institutions.

We were impressed by your ability to draw in external funding and expertise, and saw the impact of this at both a strategic and operational level. Devolution Manchester brings further advantages in terms of sharing expertise, access to development funding and closer and more integrated working across authorities and partner organisations. The use of external funding brings with it issues in relation to sustainability in the medium to long term.

The wide range of initiatives - both local and across Wigan – makes it challenging to link activity with impact and outcomes. We were not sure how you are measuring the impact of these different approaches. It is important to highlight critical success factors in rolling out innovation so that the benefits are sustained within mainstream activity. It is also important to balance local determination with delivery against an overall Wigan wide strategy. You acknowledge that not all settings are fully engaged and are working to improve this.

Although you have a wealth of data and are using this to drive services, there remain areas for improvement in terms of full access to, and integrating data flows across, all settings and common metrics across the partnership to measure and evaluate throughput, quality and outcomes.

You are a confident partnership and are open to external scrutiny and challenge, and you have also challenged national organisations when necessary.

We include a few quotes from those we met over the course of the onsite visit as these quotes convey the essence of what we found.

- I can pull threads together
- The beauty of working in Wigan is you see something you flag it up and something is done
- (they are) listening to us, we are all part of it, we are all in a team
- We're not afraid to cross any boundaries
- We know things now and are starting to unpick things...if only we had known before
- They are now only a phone call away, relationships have never been stronger
- We have the freedom to take chances and evaluate outcomes
- Taking away the fear
- I feel my child's teachers are part of the family
- The Service Delivery Footprint Huddles (aka Huddles) and The Deal are building up relationships, there's still work to be done but the door is open
- Empowering those who believed they were unworthy
- Women are more aware of domestic abuse and know it's wrong
- I didn't appreciate the impact (of what I did) had on my child until now
- How do you know you are making a difference? ...when they are in school they still knock on our door, they tell us
- The impact of huddles has been phenomenal
- Public health is a citizen led approach

Findings - your primary areas of focus

1. Integration and Partnership

Assets

There is clearly a shared vision that drives services and there is commitment to the vision from all partners at the highest level. As a consequence, staff feel empowered by their leaders and are all signed up to The Deal.

You are continuing to enhance and maintain your partnerships, including through The Leading Early Years Excellence Partnership (LEyEP) and the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector, schools and with health partners. Partnership working and co-production are well evidenced and we saw a number of examples of close and supported partnership working. As an example, we saw a very effective partnership with LEyEP and Community First Academy Trust in developing career pathways through apprenticeships to teaching. Your offer is based around an integrated and ambitious evidence based public health programme which underpins service delivery.

Early Years education delivery benefits from information sharing and you have several initiatives that provide opportunities to effectively share information for

the benefit of settings and families. Being able to utilise the case management system has really helped, providing a shared format across settings, helping to identify the right intervention and facilitating escalation when needed. You have empowered local staff to develop initiatives and innovative ways of working which if successful are then considered for roll out.

There is a creative and enviable ability to draw in external funds and expertise to enhance service delivery.

In developing your offer, you implemented an extensive consultation. You employed a range of approaches to engage with families, including attempts to engage and understand your most vulnerable families. Community involvement is evidenced by the use of a wide range of buildings and Champion and Volunteer led activities, encouraged and appropriately supported by Early Years staff. 'The Deal' is well established within Wigan and this ensures that a community and family focus is central to the development of your services. We heard many examples of this being the starting point for initiatives and service delivery.

The locality hub based model (Start Well) that you have adopted is viewed very positively. Those that are already co-located were enthusiastic and talked of improved relationships as a result. Those professionals already engaged in them viewed the SDFs and Huddles very positively. These are being implemented in varied settings, and are said to be improving communication across practitioners and bringing services together.

You are moving to implement the second phase of your strategy to co-locate and integrate services. Phase two will focus upon the integration of public health nursing services. You have been holding regular staff meetings, consultations and updates to embed integration. A key aim of this phase will be to better engage with health professionals and you are incorporating learning from where this has worked well previously.

Areas for consideration

You are beginning the process of reconfiguring the health visiting service. This service can play a vital role in providing support for families. Your plans for the future delivery of the health visiting service, once realised, should release resources and achieve efficiencies, as well as lead to improved outcomes.

Although there have been significant gains in terms of integrated information flows, your different IT systems do not always talk to each other. We heard reports that suggest that not everyone benefits from a similar level of access to shared data and systems.

You have a broad range of provision within the borough, across multiple settings, although engaging all education and childcare settings remains a challenge. Training in an asset based approach may help address engagement issues in some settings.

We saw some of the development work you are undertaking to make more use of digital platforms, some of which is the transfer to electronic media of paper leaflets, which will be helpful. You are also exploring how best to use digital media, e.g. You Tube, to provide relevant information to families. We saw the early development stage of a platform for information about parenting being developed by public health practitioners. We wonder if you could maximise the opportunities a digital offer provides for families and make more use of pre-existing commercial apps to speed this development.

We did hear from a number of sources of instances when children's needs had not been picked up at an early stage, and we acknowledge that what we were told related to 'historic' levels of response. However, we feel it is important to use the multiple points at which families come into contact with the Early Years system and professionals to assure yourself that currently and in the future, no child is slipping through the net.

We were told that Early Years is a thread through all of the work of the safeguarding board. We feel that it would better support scrutiny, challenge and accountability of Early Years practice if the safeguarding board had specific early years priorities that were monitored on a regular basis.

2. Early Years processes, access, quality of education services

Assets

There has clearly been a significant improvement in the delivery of the Early Years strategy across the whole sector as a response to The Deal. You have also developed a children and young people's version of The Deal which is helping to cascade and embed this approach still further.

The Start Well model provides a good framework on which to build, and is beginning to deliver your aspirations to have locality based Early Years that are developed in conjunction with the local community and respond to their identified needs. The Early Learning and Childcare Team and partners provide valued support to early years settings and we saw an example of how this worked in practice with the development of the well-being project at Hindley Nursery. We also heard of a range of provision, locally delivered, via centres linked to the five Start Well hubs.

We found a culture of continuous improvement to achieve your aspirations. Staff clearly feel that they have the autonomy to develop and enhance services. 'The Perfect Week' was a very good example of this and was said to have unencumbered people, removed barriers and resulted in significant learning about sharing responsibility and information flows. We were shown examples of a number of innovations and tweaks to working practices that have been implemented as a result of the Perfect Week initiative.

Other examples of effective practice include

- Proactive work across different agencies as children enter nursery
- The Well-Being Project has had a positive impact on staff as well as children and is being considered for roll out to other settings
- The Deal way of working promoted by the Early Learning and Childcare Team has helped to improve the confidence and sense of autonomy of Childminders who report that their status has risen and they are on a level with other professionals.
- Operation Encompass is having a positive impact on understanding children's' experiences and supported follow up in schools

You are using data in a number of ways to increase the effectiveness of service delivery. You collect developmental data on a termly basis for each funded and non-funded child aged 2 – 4 attending an Early Years setting which gives you a valuable data base by which to measure impact and outcomes.

You have been developing a risk stratification tool/algorithm to highlight potential vulnerable families and/or those who may be harder to engage. This is still at the development stage but is being trialled with a view to full roll out. Embedding the risk stratification approach should enable better targeting and increase the reach of your Early Years offer with the most vulnerable families.

We also saw other good examples of the use of data to target interventions at an operational level. One example of this was antenatal notifications where the specialist midwifery service analyse risk against a number of key criteria to then identify and provide enhanced support to high risk mums to be. Another example was how schools now receive domestic violence notices for children on roll so that due attention can be given to supporting them and their family at a challenging time in their lives.

A number of other innovations have the potential to positively impact on early learning and are worth highlighting as examples of how you are continuing to strive to improve practice within your own and partner settings:

- The shorter early notification form has been welcomed by GPs and has enabled them to provide information in a more timely and user-friendly way.
- The early years training and professional development offer has positively impacted working practices.
- The evidence based well-being project LEyEP are developing with parents practitioners and children will enable you to promote mental resilience in early years and hopefully sustain this throughout childhood.

Areas for consideration

You have developed a tracking tool which is an effective way to measure school readiness and demonstrate progress and the data gathered via this could be used as a service wide/cohort measure of success. The current

measure you employ to measure school readiness and demonstrate progress is Good Level of Development (GLD), but this does not allow you to measure the holistic impact of the Wigan approach across social and emotional factors and the impact of this on learning.

Although we saw good use of, and innovation, in relation to how you use data and information, we thought that, across the breadth of the partnership, organisations were measuring a number of different metrics. This suggested that there is not a consistent approach to how you measure and evaluate throughput, quality, outcomes.

We saw how data is beginning to be used to target and track children and families but were not sure whether you have as yet a comprehensive evidence base that can help to inform you of the reach of your services and demonstrate impact and outcomes. You could enhance the data you already collect by amalgamating the individualised tracking that records the child's journey and use this as a measure of cohort wide and individual longitudinal impact both at the Early Years stage and subsequently. This may provide a means of quantifying whether input at early years is sustained and results in consistent increase in outcomes across primary and secondary phases.

Two issues in relation to finance/resources arise from your success. You are very good at drawing in funding and expertise, however this results in a dilemma in terms of how you embed and sustain an approach that is so based on new initiatives/external funding opportunities. We saw the development of good early years provision in many settings, However, we were not sure how you were planning for the cost of providing excellent nursery provision versus your available funding streams.

We heard mixed messages, first, around identifying the families who do not take up your two-year old offer and, second, around identifying SEND at the first opportunity. As a result, we would counsel that you assure yourselves that these are historic issues and that now children no longer 'get lost in the system'.

3. Speech and language

Assets

You have established a broad range of communication initiatives with additional offers designed to meet local need. It's clear that in Wigan communication is seen as everybody's business and we found a real focus on developing early language and communication to achieve school readiness.

We were told of a number of initiatives to promote language development within Early Years settings and to support parents to promote language development within the home. Staff valued the training opportunities offered to them in various techniques and programmes and they were clearly empowered and able to apply this learning within the workplace.

You have enhanced the speech and language offer by funding the secondment of two Speech and Language Therapists to the Early Years team. These therapists support the learning pathway from pre-birth to school. Schools are using the Pupil Premium and Looked After Children funding to buy in specialist Speech and Language support to assist vulnerable students.

Communication and Language Champions work with Speech and Language Therapists to promote good practice. We were impressed by the sheer variety of champions that you had put in place – parents, volunteers and professionals – to support learning within your early years settings and to help you to reach out to the most challenged families.

‘Keys to Communication’ offers you the potential to bring together the various approaches we were told about within an overarching plan to promote effective communication and language development.

Two initiatives that were shared with us offered valuable benefits:

- Keys To Communication, the training element of your Speech and Language Pathway, brings together the different evidence based approaches to engaging and upskilling Practitioners. These include ELKLAN, Toddle Talk and Every Child’s A Talker, these have helped to shift thinking about promoting communication.
- WELL COM assessment enables early identification of issues that can then be targeted by staff in a timely manner

Areas for consideration

Although it is good that you are developing local responses and empowering staff to develop local initiatives, it did not make it easy for us to understand the Wigan strategy for communication and language development. The wide range of initiatives - both local and across Wigan – also makes it challenging to link activity with impact and outcomes. We were not sure how you are measuring the impact of these different approaches. It would be worth exploring how you can build on the similarities across these local models and develop some commonality of approach that helps you to measure impact and highlight potential/essential success factors.

You talked with us about the need to raise aspirations and we saw lots of work towards this goal. However, you are not unique in that this is mainly involving mothers – is there a need to put in place a comprehensive approach to involving and engaging fathers across Wigan? There will be many ways you could build wider public awareness of the importance of communication and language, using a population wide public health perspective, and promoting language and communication across families’ whole life experience e.g. given the success of local sporting clubs how could they be linked into learning and reading?

We felt that it would be useful to assure yourself on the following:

- We were told by families that a lack of consistency of therapist had meant the retelling of their story and an inconsistent service for their

child. How far is this a historic issue and would these sorts of comments still be relevant today?

- Following on from this, how do you coordinate the information and data that you and your partners collect from all contacts with parents to assure yourself that now and in all cases the right children are being reached early enough
- There is undoubtedly an increasing need for communication and language services identified by schools. Is there the capacity in place within Early Years communication and language approaches to prevent such an escalation of need in the future, and, if not, how can this be best put in place?

4. SEND

Assets

Your Early Years Targeted Support Workers within the Early Learning and Childcare Team continue their support for children with SEND into reception, so giving consistency for more vulnerable children transitioning into school. We also heard of at least one occasion where funds had been transferred to a PVI early years setting when it was considered more appropriate for one of their staff in the setting to provide this support.

The Learn to Learn project has a focus on emerging Early Years SEND children, providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum. We heard very positive views on the SENCO award scheme which you are promoting to the widest possible range of settings and hoping to engage all settings in over time.

Inclusion Progress meetings are valued and their value is emphasised by contractual obligations about participation.

We heard of a number of examples where you have used imaginative tools to hear the voice of the child e.g. talking mats.

Areas for consideration

You appear to have a higher than average incidence of SEND. Is this actually a success story - about having put in place effective early identification processes - or is there some other underlying reason? We did hear various reasons behind these figures but there did not seem to be a consistent understanding or explanation.

Given the apparently growing number of children with additional support needs, can expectations on meeting those needs be effectively managed within the available resource base within maintained and PVI settings?

We heard from parents of historic delays in the way information for referral and assessment was gathered, which had clearly impacted on timely

diagnosis and consequent provision of support packages. It is important that you assure yourselves that the reasons for this have been addressed.

There is a need to delineate between additional medical needs and the big rise in children on the autistic spectrum vis a vis those who have suffered as a result of poor parental experiences. These groups are all important areas to address but do require differentiated strategies for the specific needs in each case.

We were told of a funnel effect whereby increasingly families moved their children to schools that were perceived as good for SEND children. This was reported to us as a real issue for the individual schools concerned.

Opportunities

We thought the following were significant factors in the development of your Early Years provision to date and warranted highlighting separately from our other findings as you move to further improve services:

1. Is GLD the most appropriate way for you to measure the impact of your early years' interventions and school readiness, both on an individual and cohort basis? There is no accepted national definition of school readiness and we thought that the measures you are exploring, in terms of risk stratification and tracking, could possibly begin to provide a more rounded measure of impact and outcomes at early years than GLD. This could be of significant use not just in Wigan but across all local authorities as this is an issue common to all, and one where Wigan could show a lead to other authorities and to government.
2. Are you confident that you are using data holistically to inform the present and future development of Early Years Services to deliver your goals? As a partnership, you are working on a number of aspects of this and settings will also have much valuable local data but we were unsure if you fully analyse this to assess whether success factors are achieved. Alongside this how do you identify your most vulnerable children and provide for them to achieve their potential?
3. Evidencing the impact of your investments to date is important in order to better assess value for money and cost effectiveness. How will you develop and use intelligence and evidence to invest in the future, will that investment need to grow and how viable is growth in the current financial climate?
4. You are aware of a number of families where vulnerable adults have multiple needs which impact on their children's development. Have you a whole system approach to meeting these needs in order to help support the growth and development of all your children. How are you using The Deal as a framework to develop whole systems approaches across all services for both children and adults in order to help children thrive?

5. You have a number of overarching partnership boards. The Healthier Wigan Partnership, The Wigan Education Partnership and Leading Early Years Excellence Partnership are all said to have been key to the overall development of the Early Years model and to improving service delivery. We wondered how you would differentiate the role of the Children's Trust within your strategic partnerships and where it adds value relative to other strategic fora?
6. We saw clear corporate ownership and commitment to the Early Years agenda and alongside this long term political continuity. This has provided a confidence and promoted a structure within which you can properly pace service development within realistic timescales. We heard how politicians can link threads together and see the bigger picture on Early Years development.
7. Devolution Manchester gives you ownership of many aspects of Early Years at a local level; the Greater Manchester Children's Board decision has been to allow local flexibility in response to need but it also offers the possibility for wider resources, learning and reciprocity across all ten boroughs.
8. Maintain the progress you have made on improving significant partnership relationships in terms of the excellent emerging relationship you have brought about with GPs (your actions are said to have opened doors and developed shared ownership of the agenda) and the renewed relationship with the CCG, which will help you to realise your aspirations on integrated health delivery.
9. Consider how taking your approach to community health services into the mental health arena for children and parents will help you to maximise the support needed by the most vulnerable parents in order that their children can thrive
10. You have agreed a pathway for the future development and integration of health visiting services which will help you to maximise the benefits these practitioners can bring to families with young children.

Next Steps

It is evident that strong progress has been made at Wigan Council and you have a firm foundation upon which to build.

We hope that you will find the above findings to be a considered and true reflection of the discussions we had with you, your staff, your partners and families in Wigan. 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, Claire

Hogan (Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk; 07766 250347) or the LGA's Children's Improvement Adviser, Linda Clegg (Lindaclegg0@gmail.com; 07545 787882).

Once again, thank you for participating in this review and please pass on our gratitude to everyone involved.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Cooke', written in a cursive style.

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