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**Children’s Services**

**Resources & Efficiency Peer Challenge**

**Building the evidence base – questions and prompts for the peer team**

The following provides some suggested questions and prompts to understand the context of a place and support a detailed analysis that would identify the opportunities to control and reduce costs, ensure efficiencies and maximise positive outcomes in children’s services. This has been framed around four key themes:

* Culture and practice
* Workforce
* Placements and commissioning
* Link to financial strategy

**Culture and Practice**

* Does your performance framework drive practice? Who sees it, uses it and what difference does it make?
* What data do you get (daily, weekly, monthly or annually)?
* How do you work with the Lead Member, Chief Executive and the corporate leadership team?
* What is the level of corporate challenge?
* How effective / challenging is Scrutiny?
* How well do you understand children’s finances and trends?
* Are children’s services costs and projected growth realistic in the MTFP?
* What are your future ambitions and how does this fit with the broader corporate vision for children’s services?
* Do you risk or RAG-rate your savings and manage risk?
* What are your current budget predictions?
* How do you hold your budget holders to account?
* How do you make decisions on placements and what are partners contributions?
* Do you share risk and decision making with partners?
* How do you know that placement and commissioning strategies working?
* Do you have positive relationships with adult services, public health and community services?
* Do you have a positive relationship with schools and a shared strategy?
* What is your strategy for supporting children not in school?
* How are demographic trends impacting on spend?
* Are there regional MOU in place and are these adhered to?
* Describe your relationship with trade unions?
* What difference is your early help/early years offer making?
* What has been the impact of recent savings?
* What is the public health contribution to children’s services?

**Workforce**

* What does your recent staff survey tell you about staff morale?
* What strategies, plans and support have got in place to keep and develop your workforce?
* How do you attract and recruit the right people with the right skills?
* What challenges and gaps exists in the local labour market and how do you address these?
* What proportion of your staff are agency, does this feel the right proportion and what are you doing to reduce this?
* How are you using the outcomes from grievance and disciplinaries to improve practice?
* Do staff have regular, quality and reflective supervision?
* How do managers ensure that caseloads are manageable?
* Is IT available and used effectively to support practice?
* Does your case management system/s support good social work practice?
* How is the information you hold, where appropriate, shared with partners?
* How have you been able to manage your workforce creatively to cope with spikes in demand?

**Placements and commissioning**

* What are the numbers of children by placement type and how successful are you at influencing these numbers?
* What are the unit costs / overall costs and how this has changed over time?
* How are these costs reflected in you MTFP / future service planning?
* What is your current/future plan/strategy for placements?
* What was the mix of placements 2 or 3 years ago and how has this changed?
* What are the trends in commissioning by placement type?
* What % of children are fostered, and what is the internal / external provider mix and future expectation of this mix?
* How accurate is you budgeting and financial forecasting for placements?
* How do you ensure you buy the right things well?
* What framework contracts do you have?
* What percentage of spend is via spot contracts v framework contracts?
* Who makes placement decisions and what governance/guidance is in place?
* How are people given the skills and expertise they need to make good commissioning decisions?
* How do you use performance management information to understand changing trends in the care population and future expectations?
* What arrangements are there for internal / external residential care?
* Do you have any joint procurement / commissioning arrangements?

**Financial strategy**

* Is organisation clear about where Children’s services sits amongst corporate and financial priorities?
* How does the budget process work?
* How does the DCS and portfolio holder for children’s services work together?
* How is the savings target for children’s services set and who owns this target?
* Does the CFO/ DCS have a grasp of issues that influence / drive children’s costs
* Is the budget adjusted following a demand led overspend?
* How are contingencies managed and allocated?
* What is the scheme of delegation?
* How are financial strategies and forecasts discussed between officers and members?
* Do you understand what factors influence/drive costs?
* Do you understand potential demand in the community – and how this relates to real demand at the front door?
* How are savings options developed, are these challenged and at what stage are detailed business cases developed?
* Do you understand the role of stakeholders and partners in driving costs and delivering savings?
* What is the relationship between adults and children’s services?
* To what extent have costs of services been analysed and challenged?
* Is best practice form other places regularly sought out and assimilated?
* What is the balance between early intervention/prevention and responding based on a strategy?
* How are links with other services such as public health, housing and leisure taken in to account?
* How is risk taken into account in decision-making?
* How transparent is decision-making?
* How are capital decisions taken?
* How regularly and who monitors the budget and at what level of detail?
* How are managers held to account for financial results?
* How often are financial results reported and to whom?
* Are forecasts based on analysis?
* How well is children’s services management system linked with financial information system?
* What are the outcomes of audit and how does this change practice?