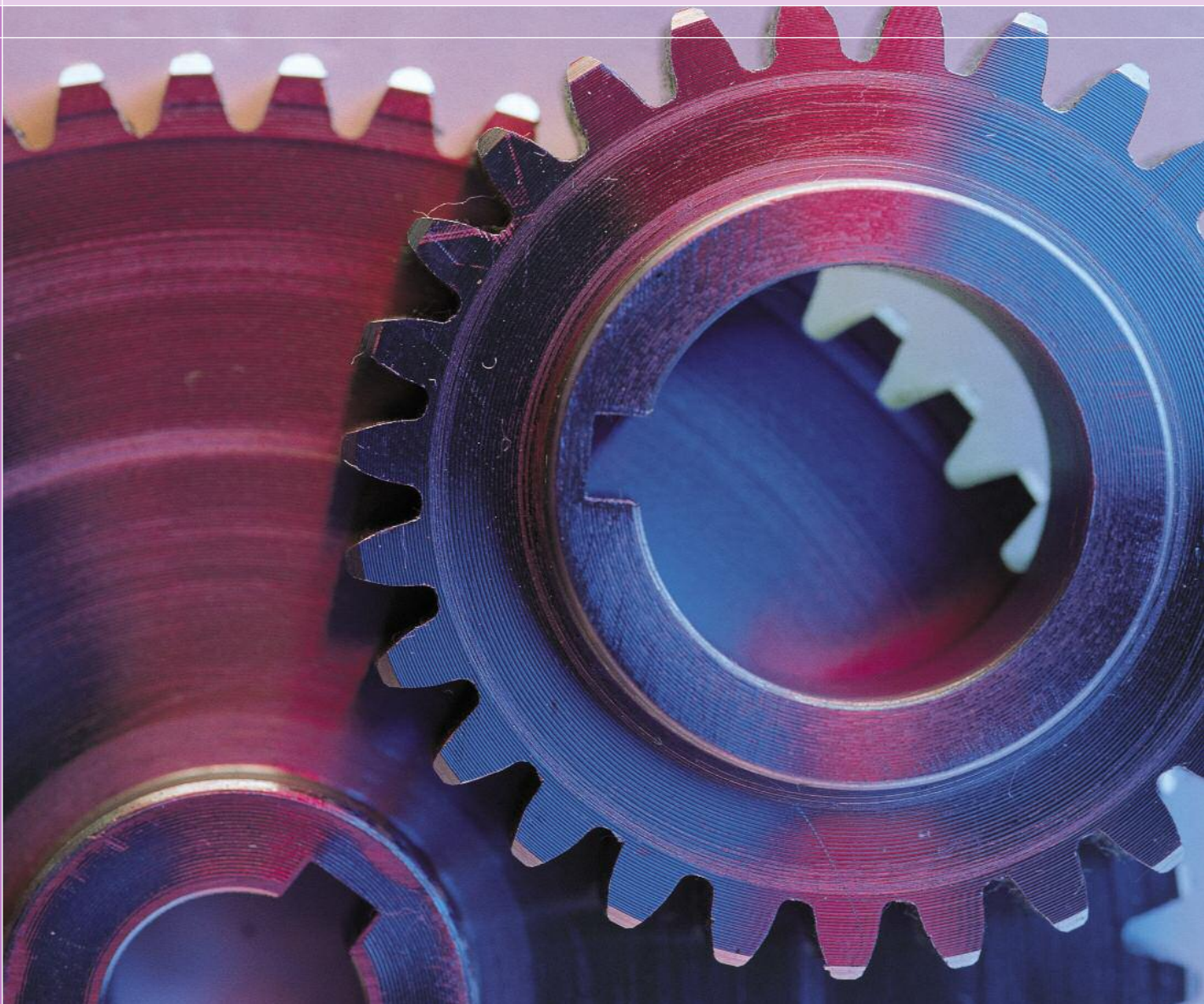# the longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews

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the longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews

Jennifer Jeffes
Kerry Martin

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

1 Research overview and methodology

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Children's Improvement Board (CIB) to explore the longer-term impact of the LGA's safeguarding children peer review programme for local authorities from 2012–2013.

1.1 Background to the study

The safeguarding children peer review programme was established in 2010, with the aim of supporting and challenging councils in reflecting on current provision of safe services in respect of safeguarding children and young people.

This study builds upon the findings of two earlier research projects conducted by NFER on behalf of the LGA, focusing on the safeguarding children peer review process and how this could be refined in local authorities which had received adequate, good or outstanding ratings of their safeguarding and looked-after children services (Martin and Jeffes, 2011) and subsequently for those authorities with a Notice to Improve (Easton *et al.*, 2012).

The findings from both these studies demonstrated that the safeguarding peer review approach was suitably flexible to result in a range of benefits for local authorities in intervention, as well as those who are not. However, while the local authorities in both studies were generally very positive about the safeguarding children peer review, there were issues in isolating the impact of the programme. On the whole, this was because local authorities tended to engage widely with a range of review and evaluation activities. Furthermore, in both cases, the research took place within a fairly short time period following the safeguarding children peer review and this prohibited

investigation into the longer-term impact and legacy of the process. Hence, this longitudinal study aims to explore and map the different types of impacts and evidence reported by local authorities receiving a safeguarding children peer review.

1.2 Aims of the research

This research seeks to provide evidence of the longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews for local authorities. In particular, the study explores:

- the aims and rationales of local authorities prior to their safeguarding children peer review, their expectations of the process and anticipated outcomes

- initial reflections on the safeguarding children peer review process and perceptions of early impact following the review

- what has changed locally in the longer term as a result of undergoing a safeguarding children peer review and how it has helped to achieve the overall desired outcomes around improvement

- lessons and learning which can be shared with the sector and provide recommendations for the LGA and CIB in relation to the safeguarding children peer review programme as a whole.

The study will provide evidence of the value of the safeguarding children peer review programme, highlighting how they have supported local authorities in implementing their plans for improvement. In addition, it will support the LGA in its work around revising the methodology used to provide safeguarding children peer reviews.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of the local authorities involved in the research

Local authority	Location	Type	Performance in most recent safeguarding and looked-after children inspection
1	Yorkshire and the Humber	Metropolitan	Inadequate
2	South East	County	Inadequate
3	South East	Unitary	Adequate
4	North West	Unitary	Adequate
5	West Midlands	Metropolitan	Adequate
6	North West	Metropolitan	Adequate

1.3 Methodology

This study explores the involvement of six local authorities in the safeguarding children peer review programme, and tracks impact over a period of one year following their review. All of the local authorities volunteered to participate in the research, following initial contact with the LGA. The characteristics of the local authorities involved in the research are set out in Table 1.1.

The research is being conducted in four distinct phases:

- **phase one**: desk research of relevant documentation for the six local authorities, to contextualise the research in relation to issues, challenges and areas of success for each local authority (September – December 2012)

- **phase two**: telephone interviews with key local authority officers, lead members and partners in all six local authorities prior to their safeguarding children peer review to explore their aims and anticipated outcomes (September – December 2012)

- **phase three**: face-to-face interviews with key local authority officers, lead members and partners in all six local authorities approximately **three months after** their review to explore emerging impacts (January – March 2013)

- **phase four**: telephone interviews with key local authority officers, lead members and partners in all six local authorities **one year after** their safeguarding children peer review to track longer-term impacts and explore legacy (September – December 2013).

This report presents the early findings of the research, following phases one and two of the study. The number of participants involved in the pre-review telephone interviews is presented in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Number of participants involved in pre-review telephone interviews

Role	Number of participants
Social care leaders (e.g. Directors of Children's Services, Heads of Service)	11
Corporate leaders (e.g. Programme Managers, Business Managers)	3
Partners (e.g. Health, Local Children's Safeguarding Board Chairs)	9
Council members	2
Practitioners	2
Total	**27**

2 Rationale for engaging in a safeguarding children peer review

This section sets out local authorities' rationale for engaging in a safeguarding children peer review, based upon the findings from phases 1 and 2 of the study. In particular, it explores the:

- aims of the safeguarding children peer review across the six local authorities

- profile of the safeguarding children peer review alongside other review and evaluation activities

- perceived value of the safeguarding children peer review process relative to other forms of improvement.

2.1 Aims of the safeguarding children peer review across the six local authorities

The [safeguarding children] *peer review team will come in and have a look at where* [we] *are, based on where* [we] *think we are. It's that external pair of eyes to say, have we progressed as we think we have? Are we on the right track?*

Service Manager

The aims of all six local authorities participating in a safeguarding children peer review comprised a combination of objectives to improve local practice in general, and specific aims reflected in the key lines of enquiry agreed in advance of the review. In particular, local authorities hoped that the safeguarding children peer review would support the following activities:

- authentic and real-world reflective practice and improvement

- specific service or process improvement (for example, improvements in their referral processes, early intervention strategies, and information-sharing policies)

- benchmarking of progress since recent Ofsted inspections.

In contrast with the previous studies, the six local authorities did not appear to be motivated to participate in a safeguarding children peer review as a trial run for Ofsted, reflecting a greater understanding and acceptance of the purposes of the safeguarding children peer reviews. There were, however, instances where it was envisaged that it would support preparation for inspection as part of a systematic programme of review and evaluation (see section 2.2).

There was a distinction between the aims of local authorities which had been rated as inadequate in their most recent Ofsted inspections and those which had been more successful. Local authorities with inadequate ratings appeared to have wide ranging aims, relating to broad areas of service improvement, whereas those which had been more successful tended to focus on more specific, process-based improvements (for example, the effectiveness of their quality assurance processes or performance management system).

2.2 Profile of the safeguarding children peer review alongside other review activities

Part of improving services is holding them up to peer challenge .... That way we don't fool ourselves into thinking we have good services simply because Ofsted may have said so. I would rather do it through a peer process, because the peer process is a two way street with learning on both sides.

Lead Member for Children's Services

The six local authorities routinely engage in review and evaluation activities designed to monitor progress and support continual service improvements in their safeguarding practice. Examples of such activities included: regular reviews of cases and client records; monitoring of progress against improvement or action plans; and internal peer-to-peer observation of practice.

The local authorities gave high priority to the safeguarding children peer review as a method of complementing and supporting their existing evaluation activities, commonly reporting that they expected the review process to offer insights of a different nature to other, internally directed activities. For example, interviewees in one local authority reported that many of their existing review and evaluation activities focused on audits of particular safeguarding processes and procedures. The safeguarding children peer review, by contrast, was expected to offer an opportunity to explore in depth the impact of those processes on outcomes for children and young people.

There appeared, however, to be considerable variation in the extent to which the safeguarding children peer review process was systematically planned into the local authorities' programmes of ongoing review. In some cases, local authorities reported that the safeguarding children peer review had been specifically timetabled into a rolling programme of improvement and that this was coordinated with programmes of peer challenge. In others, however, the safeguarding children peer review programme was perceived as an additional layer of evaluation to enhance other, more routine evaluation activities. Adherence to an organised programme of review and evaluation appeared to be particularly critical in smaller local authorities, where senior staff tended to occupy a number of roles, to prevent overburden on staff and resources.

2.3 Perceived value of the safeguarding children peer review process relative to other forms of improvement

The main value is the idea of it being more of a critical friend approach …. Of course there is some degree of scrutiny by entering into the exercise but it is not perhaps as heavy-handed as an inspection is and it allows you to have that dialogue with the [safeguarding children] *peer review team.*

Independent Chair,
Local Safeguarding Children's Board

The six local authorities anticipated that the safeguarding children peer review process would be highly valuable in complementing their existing strategies for improvement. In particular, they anticipated that the safeguarding children peer review process would add value to their existing strategies for improvement by enabling them to:

- compare their safeguarding practices with those of other local authorities, and identify areas for improvement

- engage in open reflection and dialogue with an empathetic critical friend

- measure progress following an Ofsted inspection

- stimulate sector-led improvement, advised by a team of peers with current, relevant experience of safeguarding practice

- take time to reflect as a team on specific areas for improvement.

In general, the local authorities did not envisage many barriers to their ability to derive value from the safeguarding children peer review process. However, they were keen to select key lines of enquiry focusing on areas for improvement, rather than particular strengths: one interviewee reported, for example, that 'we don't want to be told what we already know'. Several interviewees also emphasised the importance of demonstrating the independence and rigour of the safeguarding children peer review process to external stakeholders, to ensure that their recommendations would be given appropriate recognition.

3 Experiences of planning for the review

This section explores local authority interviewees' experiences of preparing for their review. In particular, it explores:

- interviewees' involvement in preparing for a safeguarding children peer review

- extent of partnership involvement in preparation for the review.

3.1 Involvement in preparing for a safeguarding children peer review

Interviewees had been involved in a range of activities to set up, and prepare for, their safeguarding children peer review. These activities included:

- liaising with the LGA safeguarding children peer review manager

- discussing and agreeing key lines of enquiry for the review

- selecting the key personnel to be involved in the safeguarding children peer review

- making arrangements for on-site visits

- gathering data and documentation and completing self-evaluation questionnaires

- carrying out case-file mapping exercises.

Interviewees' occupying senior, strategic roles, for example, heads of service and service managers, tended to have greater involvement in preparing for the safeguarding children peer review than staff with responsibility for delivery of frontline services.

Overall, the local authorities had positive experiences of preparing for their review and felt supported through the process by their LGA safeguarding children peer review manager. A small number of interviewees,

however, had some reservations about the methodology used for the safeguarding children peer review, expressing concern that it would give undue focus to safeguarding processes within the local authority at the expense of an evidence-based critique of outcomes for children and young people.

3.2 Extent of partnership involvement in preparation for the review

The six local authorities appeared, to varying degrees, to have sought the engagement of partners from a range of sectors in preparing for their safeguarding children peer review. This included, for example, representatives from health, education, the police and the voluntary sector. Local authority officers were commonly enthusiastic about the value of engaging with partners, viewing their involvement from the earliest stages of preparation as essential in creating a shared understanding and sense of purpose to the review.

The involvement of partners prior to the review was also perceived as a necessary precursor to bringing about meaningful change based on the review team's recommendations. Effective translation of these recommendations into positive outcomes for children was considered to be contingent upon continuity and joined up working across agencies. This was particularly true where the aims of a local authority's safeguarding children peer review crossed organisational boundaries (for example, tracking and evidencing the progress of a child's journey through the care system).

Interviewees from partner agencies reported that they had been involved in preparation activities such as: agreeing key lines of enquiry; providing data for their local authority's self-evaluation; and contributing to case-file mapping exercises. As was the case in previous studies, partner agencies are typically represented by senior level staff rather than those in operational roles and this appeared to be particularly pronounced during the planning stages. There were,

however, examples of local authorities taking a more proactive role to securing the buy-in and engagement of frontline staff. This has included, for example, providing verbal and written briefings for partner agency staff.

3.3 Rationale for inclusion of particular roles and teams in the review

> *We will speak to all the managers of the team, the cabinet member, the chief executive but at the end of the day I don't really think that you can impact on performance unless you speak to actually frontline services.*
>
> Lead Member for Children's Services

The rationale for inclusion of particular roles and teams in the safeguarding children peer review process varied between local authorities. Some appeared to have selected individuals for involvement in the safeguarding children peer review based wholly on the LGA's guidance, viewing this as essential in maintaining transparency and reducing bias. Others appeared to have considered more deeply their motivations for engaging individuals in the review, aiming to select participants who reflected the particular structure and context of the local authority. All recognised the importance of including frontline staff in the review,

with one participant reporting that they were keen to avoid involving only senior staff who were 'all singing off the same hymn sheet'. In some cases, however, frontline staff themselves did not know what the safeguarding children peer review would involve, and were unsure about why they had been selected to participate. Where lead members were involved in the pre-review interviews, they expressed great enthusiasm to support the review and anticipated significant involvement.

There was also considerable variation in the professional background of the local authority officer selected to oversee preparation for the review. In three of the local authorities, the responsible officer held a corporate leadership position (specialising, for example, in business or strategic development) rather than having a background in social care. This approach was considered to be particularly valuable in reducing the amount of time social care colleagues spent preparing for the review. However, whilst there was usually broad input from a range of senior professionals in determining the key lines of enquiry, this distinction appeared to have led to differences in the process by which individuals and cases were selected for inclusion in the review: one director of children's services, for example, reported that they may have had different priorities in preparing for the case-file mapping exercises.

4 Actual and anticipated outcomes of the safeguarding children peer review

> *It will be an opportunity to focus on the areas where we need to improve …. It will hopefully give us the impetus to move forward more quickly in relation to all services and, therefore, get us in a good place for future delivery to children and young people. We are doing this to improve outcomes for children.*
>
> Director of Children's Services

Interviewees in all six of the local authorities anticipated that the safeguarding children peer review would lead to positive impacts for service improvement and outcomes for children and young people. The local authorities anticipated that the outcomes of the review would be a combination of specific improvements in relation to their key lines of enquiry, as well as wider, cross-cutting improvements drawing on the safeguarding children peer review team's reflections of their overall safeguarding practice. Local authorities' anticipated impacts can be categorised into three broad areas:
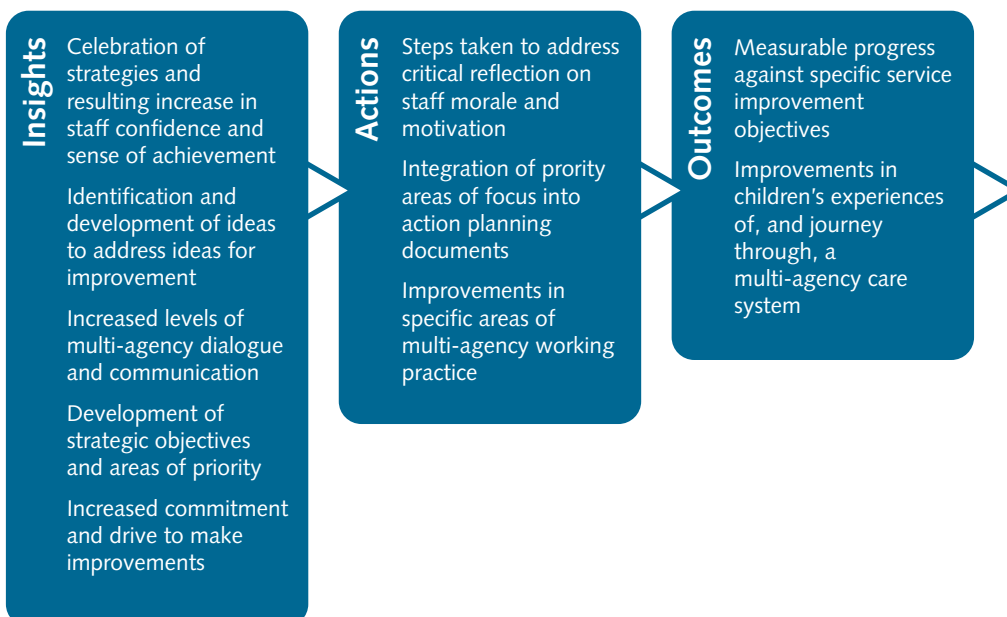
- impacts on local authorities' insight into their strengths and areas of weakness, which were generally anticipated to be realised immediately or in the weeks following the safeguarding children peer review

- impacts on local authorities' actions to develop services or working practices, which were likely to emerge within a few months of the safeguarding children peer review

- changes or improvements in the outcomes of local authorities' safeguarding practice, which local authorities anticipated would be experienced in the longer term.

While not always linear, the local authorities appeared to view impacts arising from the safeguarding children peer review as having a natural progression through these three stages. Whilst it was anticipated that these impacts would be experienced by staff at all levels, in general early impacts were anticipated to be felt most strongly by colleagues working at a strategic level, before filtering through to staff responsible for frontline delivery and ultimately, children and young people. A selection of the outcomes anticipated by local authorities is set out in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 shows that the local authorities expect many of the impacts arising from the safeguarding children peer review to occur at 'insight' level, within a relatively short time frame. The types of impacts

Figure 4.1 Outcomes anticipated by local authorities

Insights
- Celebration of strategies and resulting increase in staff confidence and sense of achievement
- Identification and development of ideas to address ideas for improvement
- Increased levels of multi-agency dialogue and communication
- Development of strategic objectives and areas of priority
- Increased commitment and drive to make improvements

Actions
- Steps taken to address critical reflection on staff morale and motivation
- Integration of priority areas of focus into action planning documents
- Improvements in specific areas of multi-agency working practice

Outcomes
- Measurable progress against specific service improvement objectives
- Improvements in children's experiences of, and journey through, a multi-agency care system

anticipated suggest that the local authorities view the safeguarding children peer review team as having an important role both in identifying a wide range of areas for development, as well as sharing their depth of experience in making practical suggestions for local authorities to drive forward improvement.

Next, the local authorities expected to see impacts at the 'action' level. Broadly, they anticipated that these impacts would come about as a direct result of their discussion and reflection following the safeguarding children peer review. In this case, local authorities and their partners expected to provide the impetus for bringing about impacts, in contrast to insights stimulated by the safeguarding children peer review team members themselves.

Interestingly, the local authorities identified relatively few anticipated impacts at the 'outcomes' level. In part, this was because interviewees were unable to predict what would be recommended by the review

team. However, this also suggests that although local authorities have highly ambitious aims for their safeguarding children peer review and anticipate numerous impacts on their understanding of, and response to, areas for improvement, they do not always have a clear view about how this will be translated into positive outcomes for children and young people.

Some of the local authorities observed that positive outcomes had already been realised as a result of their preparations for their safeguarding children peer review although these were, in general, limited. These impacts included: improved communication between agencies; increased focus on areas for development; and increased motivation to drive forward improvements. Partner agencies did not tend to recognise impacts at this stage of the process, viewing their role as supporting the local authority with preparation for the safeguarding children peer review rather than pursuing their own aims.

5 Strategies for taking forward the findings of the review

I am very outcomes focused. I want to see improvements in what we do .... I want to see other ideas and initiatives that we can learn from anyone else. Is there any other ways that we can be working?

Lead Member for Children's Services

Interviewees expected that they would be provided with timely feedback on the findings of the safeguarding children peer review, either in verbal and written form from the review team or, if they did not anticipate involvement in the review team's feedback session, through clear communication and dialogue with their colleagues. Interviewees were generally satisfied by this approach, viewing feedback from the review team as a starting point for internal consideration and discussion.

Some of the local authorities anticipated that they would act upon all of the safeguarding children peer review team's recommendations. Others, however, planned to take a more focused and critical approach, opting to act only on the recommendations they considered to be of greatest importance and strategic priority. In practice, local authorities envisaged that this would involve scrutiny of the safeguarding children peer review findings, working alongside their Children's Trust Board and Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB), to determine a focused strategy for action. The local authorities felt that this approach would ultimately lead to greater impact, allowing local authority officers and their partners to devote their energies to bringing about meaningful change in a small number of key areas.

Most of the local authorities planned to draw upon established procedures for action planning to take forward the safeguarding children peer review team's findings, and anticipated that their recommendations would be assimilated into existing planning, policy and strategy documents. It was generally felt that responsibilities for taking forward these recommendations would be allocated to key personnel (for example, a head of service or, if the recommendation spanned more than one service, a group of senior officers who would share responsibility for improvement). Interviewees reported that this would be subject to ongoing monitoring and review, and that this mechanism would drive progress. In most cases, however, local authorities did not appear to have clear strategies in place for ensuring the accountability of these individuals.

The local authorities were, in general, comfortable with sharing the findings from the safeguarding children peer review with their partner agencies and scrutiny boards (e.g. Children's Trust Board, LSCB), viewing their role as critical in successfully implementing the multi-agency aspects of the safeguarding children peer review team's recommendations. They did not appear, however, to have widely considered whether it would be necessary to share the safeguarding children peer review findings in future Ofsted inspections. Local authorities also identified the degree to which the safeguarding children peer review team's recommendations would be made available to the public as an issue. Whilst all interviewees appeared committed to an open process of peer review, viewing it as a valuable learning opportunity, there were some concerns that by asking the safeguarding children peer review team to focus on areas for improvement rather than areas of strength, this could lead to an unduly negative representation of safeguarding practice if taken out of context.

5.1 Strategies for recording, measuring and evidencing impact

I don't think that I have given that [measurement of impact] *too much thought. If the peer review comes out and confirms our theories, then we have got measures in place. If it comes up with new ideas, we will need to consider and reflect on them because the impact will be to alter something more than is currently the plan.*

Head of Social Care

The local authorities did not, in general, have in place clear strategies for recording, measuring and evidencing the impact of their safeguarding children peer review. Whilst the local authorities indicated that the recommendations of the safeguarding children peer review team would be integrated into existing improvement plans and action planning documents, and progress monitored on an ongoing basis, there remained a number of areas of concern:

• Whilst the local authorities envisaged that the safeguarding children peer review team's recommendations would be reflected in their documentation, in general they had not established specific targets against which progress in each of their key lines of enquiry could be measured.

• In a number of the local authorities, officers with responsibility for organising the review did not anticipate continued involvement in bringing about impact, thus limiting local authorities' ability to track and evidence progress in the longer term.

• Multi-agency partners were often unaware of how the local authority planned to evidence impacts arising from the safeguarding children peer review, which has implications for the extent to which progress across organisational boundaries will be measured.

6 Summary and next steps

The findings presented in this first interim report suggest that the six local authorities are committed to deriving impact from their safeguarding children peer review, viewing it as a valuable opportunity to recognise and celebrate strengths, as well as address areas for improvement. Most were ambitious in their expectations of impact, anticipating that the safeguarding children peer review team would provide an impetus to drive forward improvements in service delivery and subsequent outcomes for children and young people. There were, however, considerable variations in local authorities' approaches to preparing for the review, which may affect the nature, scope and longevity of impact. The key variables likely to have a bearing upon the impacts experienced by local authorities include:

- **Agreement and mutual understanding of the aims of the safeguarding children peer review across agencies**: within the local authorities, there was sometimes variation in the specific aims and objectives across the review, which may affect the extent to which colleagues are able to move forward with a shared sense of purpose.

- **The implementation of specific, measurable targets for improvement immediately following the review**: whilst all the local authorities proposed strategies for taking forward the recommendations of the review, many had not considered whether they would need to set specific targets to assess and attribute progress.

- **Allocation of responsibilities for taking forward the review team's recommendations**: the local authorities' success in making improvements based upon the safeguarding children peer review team's recommendations is likely to be dependent on how responsibilities are allocated.

- **Strategies for evidencing impact**: relatively few interviewees had considered how the impacts arising from the safeguarding children peer review would be evidenced, raising concerns that this will make it difficult for the local authorities to demonstrate and communicate impact.

The next phase of this research will include face-to-face visits to each of the local authorities involved in the study, approximately three months after their safeguarding children peer review. The visits will track the emergence, development and attribution of impacts arising from the review, taking account of the variables described above.

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Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/
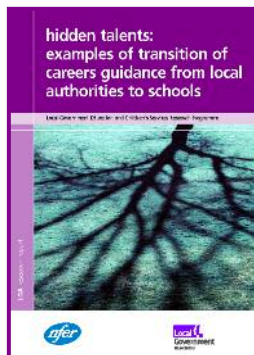
hidden talents: examples of transition of careers guidance from local authorities to schools

This report highlights how schools are trying to meet the challenge to provide impartial and independent careers guidance to their students and how LAs are supporting schools to meet their new duty. Drawing on eight telephone case studies where key staff in schools and LAs were interviewed, this report features ways in which to support schools to meet their new duty.

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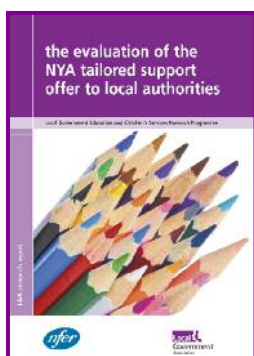
The evaluation of the NYA tailored support offer to local authorities

This report shows how local authorities have benefited from the National Youth Agency (NYA) programme of tailored support to local authorities. Drawing on interviews with local authorities who had received support, this evaluation highlights the support received by LAs and the benefits and impacts this has had on their youth service.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NYAS02
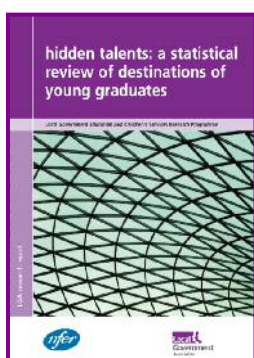
Hidden talents: A statistical review of destinations of young graduates

This report is in addition to the 'Hidden Talents - A statistical overview of the participation patterns of young people aged 16-24'. It looks at graduate employment rates by Local Authority allowing the reader to see variation across the country and where there has been the most change over two time periods.

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LGA research report

NFER is currently undertaking an evaluation of the longer-term impacts of the LGA's Safeguarding Children Peer Review programme. This first interim report presents the findings from the early phases of the research, detailing six local authorities' expectations and anticipated outcomes of their involvement in the peer review process. The report captures: the aims of each local authority engaging in the review; the value of the peer review process relative to other forms of improvement; the nature and timing of anticipated impacts; and strategies for taking forward learning from the review, including measurement of impact.