

the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews

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Executive summary

The Local Government Association (LGA) and Children's Improvement Board (CIB) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an evaluation of the Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews. The evaluation built on a previous study carried out by NFER which explored the Safeguarding Children Peer Review process (Martin and Jeffes, 2011). Given the increase in number of LAs experiencing difficulties and/or in intervention and requesting a peer review, the CIB and the LGA wished to focus this new study on exploring the impact of the peer review process on authorities with a Notice to Improve.

Key findings

The safeguarding peer reviews met the global aims and objectives of the five local authorities participating in this study, providing the necessary external scrutiny they required. The evaluation shows that, typically, LAs in intervention engage in a safeguarding children peer review in order to: obtain an external perspective on the quality of safeguarding services; assess progress made in improving safeguarding services, and; identify and confirm areas for development to support future progression planning and prepare for forthcoming inspections. Peer reviews were conducted in a formal and professional manner and the review findings were typically in line with what was anticipated by LAs involved. Reviews provided staff with the necessary validation and reassurance to support their improvement journey.

It was common for partners including the police, health and the voluntary sector, to engage in some aspect of the safeguarding peer review process. Furthermore, the peer review process is seen as a valuable mechanism for bringing partners together and helping to facilitate future partnership working.

Interviewees reported that the safeguarding peer review methodology works well and can be tailored sufficiently to the needs of a LA in intervention. The key features considered to be of particular importance in

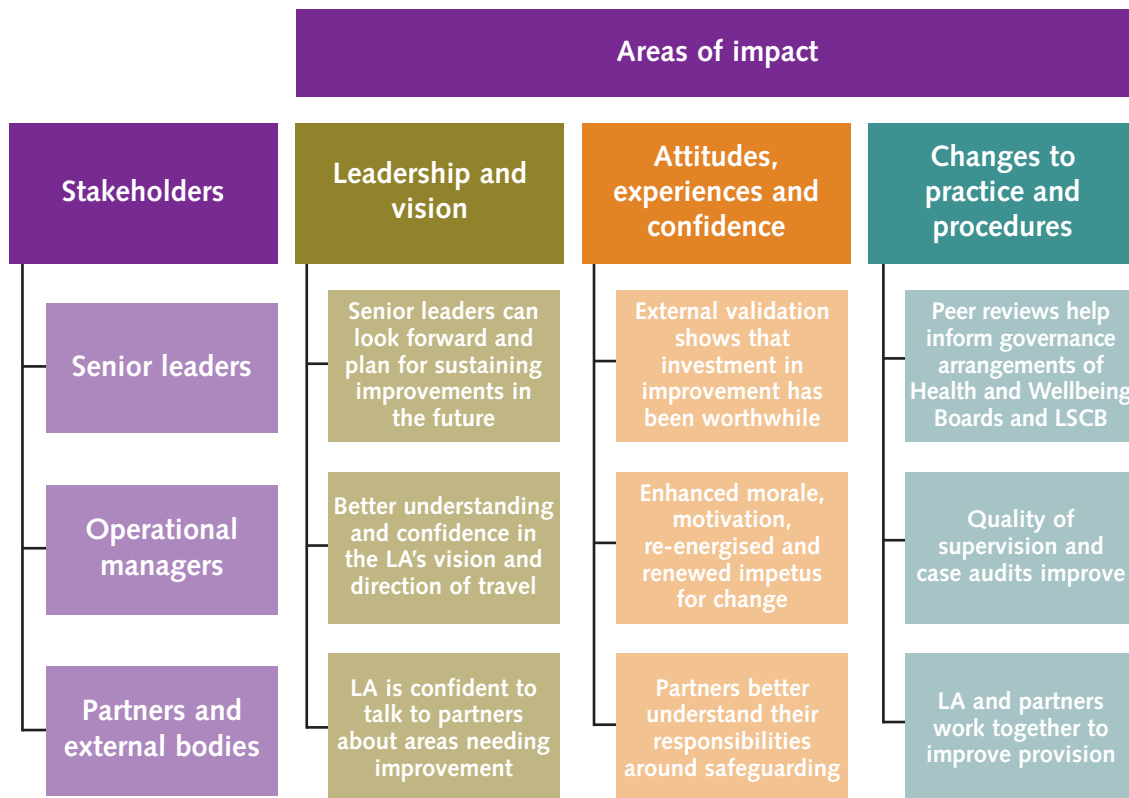
shaping the success of the reviews include the flexible format and nature of the review methodology; the experience and approach of the peer review team and the organisational commitment, openness and transparency of the host local authority.

By contrast, very few interviewees identified aspects of the safeguarding peer review programme that meant its success was limited. Features perceived to work less well, however, included whether the timeframe of the safeguarding peer reviews allowed sufficient time for the review team to delve into the level of detail the host required and to reflect on the emerging findings; ensuring an appropriate match of peers and review teams to individual authorities' structure and settings and the timing and format of the feedback process to ensure findings can be shared with staff and partners, reflected and acted upon.

While it can be difficult to attribute change directly to one intervention, the reported areas of impact and the stakeholders that benefited from the peer review are summarised in the diagram overleaf.

The findings from this research corroborate those from the previous safeguarding peer review study (Martin and Jeffes, 2011). The safeguarding peer review approach appears to be suitably flexible to allow authorities in intervention and those who are not, to achieve a successful outcome. For both types of authorities, the peer review is shown to increase commitment and drive to improve; inform, support and legitimise the development of plans, actions, policies and systems; promote learning and reflective practice; improve staff morale and relations; affirm and enhance the quality of partnership working; help LA, council and partner seniors leaders understand safeguarding children issues and how to overcome areas of weakness, and; provide the opportunity to develop longer term relationships between the peer review team and the LA receiving the review.

For authorities contemplating involvement in a peer review, the following areas are identified for their consideration: embrace the peer review process and



adopt an open approach; ensure buy-in from corporate leaders, partners, senior leaders and independent boards; establish a key focus; ensure the peer review takes place at an appropriate point in time and compliments the timeframes of formal inspection processes; ensure an appropriate peer review team; allow for sufficient preparation; manage the message to staff and partners before the review and when feeding back the findings, and; action the findings.

Methods

Telephone interviews were carried out with 25 staff from across five LAs who were at different stages of intervention. The LAs comprise three counties, a metropolitan and a unitary. Interviews took place with a range of LA officers, councillors and staff from partner organisations. Interviews took place during January and February 2012.

1 Introduction

The Local Government Association (LGA) and the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an independent evaluation of the impact of the safeguarding peer review programme.

The safeguarding children peer review programme was led by the former IDeA at its inception and became fully operational from January 2010. With the reorganisation of the former Local Government Group the programme is now managed by the LGA. The aims of the peer review programme when it was set up were to support and challenge councils in reflecting on current provision of safe services in respect of safeguarding children and young people.

At the time of commissioning this study (December 2011) 45 peer reviews had been booked and feedback reported to LGA officers from those delivered has been generally positive.

In August 2010, the LGA commissioned the NFER to conduct a study looking at the peer review programme. This study had a particular focus on the process of peer reviews and the associated outcomes and explored:

- the changes taking place locally as a result of the peer review process
- the benefits for those local authorities taking part in a peer review.

Since the publication of the report from this study (Martin, K. and Jeffes, J., 2011), the LGA has reported a shift change with more authorities who are experiencing difficulties and, in some cases, who are in intervention, asking for a peer review. The previous study reported on work in local authorities (LAs) who felt they were doing 'OK' and were looking for some validation around this. In contrast, those LAs experiencing difficulties and/or in intervention come to the process with a different desired outcome. It is these local authorities that the CIB and the LGA

wished to focus on in this new study exploring the impact of the peer review process.

1.1 Purpose and aims of the study

The aim of this study is to provide evidence of the impact of safeguarding peer reviews for local authorities who are in intervention. In particular, the study:

- gathers reflections on the safeguarding children peer review process and its impact from councils receiving a review
- explores what has changed locally as a result of undergoing a safeguarding children peer review, thinking about the peer review as part of an overall journey and exploring how the peer review took the authority in a particular direction in order to achieve the overall desired outcomes around improvement
- highlights the peer review approach required for local authorities in intervention, demonstrating how this might differ compared with LAs who are not in intervention.

The study provides evidence of the value of the peer review programme, highlighting how peer reviews 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 peer reviews, as part of a review of the model in late 2011 and early 2012.

1.2 Methodology

The LGA recruited five LAs who were at different stages of intervention and who had received a safeguarding peer review, to take part in this study. The LAs comprise three counties, a metropolitan and a unitary.

Table 1 Numbers of interviewees by job roles

Job role	Number of interviewees
Director of Children’s Services	5
Head of Quality Assurance	1
Commissioning Director	1
Transformation and Performance Director	1
Head of Human Resources	1
Assistant Director/Head of Safeguarding	6
Principal Manager	1
Lead Officer for Case Mapping	1
Local Authority Chief Executive	1
Lead Member for Children’s Services	4
Local Safeguarding Children’s Board Chair	2
Assistant Director Hospital Trust	1

A total of 25 telephone interviews were conducted with a selection of local authority officers, councillors and staff from partner organisations. Interviews were carried out in January and February 2012. Table 1 provides details of the number of interviewees by job role¹.

1.3 Report structure

This report sets out the findings of the interviews and covers:

- Background, aims and processes (Chapter 2)
- Impacts of the peer review (Chapter 3)
- Future developments and recommendations (Chapter 4).

¹ Throughout the report, the Director responsible for Children’s Services in the LA is referred to as the DCS. Likewise, we have used generic terms for assistant directors to ensure individuals are not identifiable.

2 Background, aims and processes

This chapter sets out the main findings of the study and explores:

- background and aims of a safeguarding peer review
- perceptions of the safeguarding peer review process.

2.1 Background and aims of a safeguarding peer review

Local authorities in intervention typically engage in a safeguarding children peer review in order to:

- obtain an external perspective on the quality of safeguarding services
- assess progress made in improving safeguarding services
- identify and confirm areas for development to support future progression planning
- prepare for forthcoming inspections.

For local authorities in intervention, a key aim of the peer review relates to the need for independent external feedback on the adequacy and effectiveness of local safeguarding services from peers with safeguarding experience and expertise. The neutrality and objectivity of the peer review team means that their perspectives are used to validate the findings of internal reviews and self-assessments of local safeguarding services. In particular, peer reviews are felt to provide a valuable form of external monitoring between formal inspection phases and compliment the various and ongoing forms of scrutiny offered to local authorities with Improvement Notices. Indeed, in two case-study areas, their Improvement Board stipulated the authority should participate in a safeguarding peer review.

We wanted someone else to evaluate us because we had quite a lot of changes and we wanted to see if the changes were actually delivering ... Unless we know the problems, we can't address them.

(Lead Member)

What you present on a monthly basis at your intervention meetings is a very high level and you need to be able to delve deeper underneath the surface and look more tactically at some of the things you are doing and that's what the peer review does, like an Ofsted inspection does which the intervention team doesn't.

(Head of HR)

There was a ministerial requirement that we undertook a peer review. It seemed sensible to us and it was also something that the DfE were very happy with. The requirement of was a temperature check around our improvement journey.

(DCS)

Peer reviews are used by local authorities in intervention to benchmark safeguarding performance and assess progress against targets and performance indicators set out in improvement plans and inspection reports. In this way, peer reviews are viewed as a valuable mechanism for scrutinising the effectiveness and sustainability of changes made to safeguarding following the Notice to Improve. The potential to validate and showcase effective practice is also a motivating factor for local authorities. This includes using a safeguarding peer review to demonstrate improvement internally to lead members and corporate strategic leaders, as well as highlight progress externally to the DfE and Ofsted. A further aim, for some authorities, is to boost the morale of staff who may have experienced significant organisational change and intense scrutiny as a result of the authority being in intervention. In these cases, an objective of the peer review is to provide an opportunity for individuals to reflect upon progress made and gain feedback and recognition for their efforts in improving safeguarding practice.

It was an opportunity to take stock and really reflect on what our achievements were today and to create that conversation about what difference are we making. Often, the focus is on let's just get the business done, but this was about actually stopping and saying are we still doing the right things and are we making a difference.

(Divisional Manager)

What we had hoped, in the best-case scenario, is that it would be part of our evidence base to show continued improvement ... Worst-case scenario it would be flagging up areas that we had overlooked or that we had not given sufficient attention to in preparation for a further Ofsted inspection.

(DCS)

Although authorities in intervention report a good level of awareness in relation to current deficiencies in their safeguarding services, key objectives for the peer review are to confirm and verify these areas of underperformance and to uncover further areas for development through scrutiny of specific aspects of practice. By identifying where improvements can be made in the short term, authorities can look to address these prior to forthcoming inspections in order to improve the outcome. It is also anticipated that peer review teams will provide advice and recommendations on how to further enhance aspects of safeguarding practice in the longer term, which can be incorporated into improvement plans.

In some circumstances, a goal of the review is to gain the necessary external recognition and agreement of staff concerns in order to support their efforts internally for change and secure additional financial resources, where required. In other cases, peer reviews are used by local authorities to confirm and, to some extent, sanction progression to the next stages of improvement planning, providing confidence and reassurance to staff that they are in a position to move forward.

Sometimes you know where your weaknesses are and you know that you've got to take action on those weaknesses and I think this (peer review) gives you extra ammunition if you like to actually sort things out.

(Lead Member)

When we had the set up meeting for the peer review I'd been here a couple of months and I was already picking up concerns about the looked after part of the

service, so we wanted to specifically concentrate on that and see whether all our analysis was right ... It was about checking whether judgements I'd formed were accurate.

(Assistant Director)

When you've been in government intervention it can be quite easy sometimes to convince yourself that you've done what you needed to do ... For us, it's about having someone else externally review and analyse what we have done and really ensure that we are on the right track and give us some validation that we are going in the right direction.

(Head of HR)

Although local authorities are aware that the safeguarding peer review is not intended to replicate a formal inspection or external audit of local services, a key purpose of a peer review is often to prepare for such events. To some extent, peer reviews are used to encourage staff to collate data and documentation to evidence practice and performance, for example, which will be required for future inspections. Peer reviews are also seen as an opportunity for staff to rehearse how they might convey messages most effectively to inspectors in a supportive environment. For local authorities in intervention, staff have often been exposed to external scrutiny which has not always been a positive experience. In this way, the aim of the peer review is to reassure and build confidence amongst the workforce.

We wanted to have a peer review in a fairly safe environment because as an authority that has been through a number of inspections, in fairly quick succession, we need to support staff in rebuilding their confidence when speaking to external people.

(Divisional Manager)

Overall, the rationale for undertaking a peer review for local authorities in intervention is to investigate strategic level safeguarding issues in order to inform the authority's wider improvement journey. Although there may be certain areas of focus within a review, (for example, to examine the effectiveness of social work practice), investigating specific aims relating to particular groups of children and families are not currently identified as being amongst the review's core aims. Equally, safeguarding peer reviews are not primarily focused on the wider local authority, their partners or on the needs of individual professionals.

2.2 Perceptions of the safeguarding peer review process

Overall, safeguarding peer reviews met the global aims and objectives of the five local authorities participating in this study, providing the necessary external scrutiny they required. Peer reviews were conducted in a formal and professional manner as expected. The findings were typically in line with what was anticipated by local authorities involved, providing staff with the necessary validation and reassurance to support their improvement processes.

This section explores the nature and extent of interviewees' involvement in a safeguarding children peer review and their perceptions of the engagement of partners in the process. It sets out interviewees' views on the effectiveness of the review methodology for authorities in intervention and the key features and limiting factors considered to be of particular importance in shaping its success.

2.2.1 Involvement in a safeguarding peer review

The nature and extent of interviewees' involvement in a safeguarding children peer review differ depending on their role. Peer review activities typically include:

- set-up activities: liaising with the LGA peer review programme manager, scoping and agreeing the review brief, selecting the review team, organising the on-site visit, briefing staff, start up meetings with the review team
- collating key documents and data including local authority plans and strategy documents, completing a self-evaluation questionnaire and carrying out a case-file mapping exercise
- participating in face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with the review team during the review's on-site week
- having ongoing dialogue with the review team throughout the review week to discuss emerging findings and provide clarification where required
- attending feedback and action planning events

- follow-up activities: meetings with staff internally to get their feedback on the review and the findings, sharing the review report with corporate leaders, management teams and partners, refining existing plans, developing action plans and implementing changes based on recommendations made.

2.2.2 Partnership engagement and buy-in

It is common for partners including the police, health and the voluntary sector to engage in some aspect of the safeguarding peer review process. Proposals to undertake a peer review are often shared and agreed with key partners, through existing multi-agency groups, such as the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) or Children's Trust Board. Typically, partners contribute to the peer review by providing data for the self evaluation, carrying out case mapping, participating in interviews with the review team during the on-site visit and attending feedback sessions. From the perspective of local authorities, partnership involvement in safeguarding peer reviews is generally considered to be good. The peer review process is seen as a valuable mechanism for bringing partners together and can facilitate future partnership working (see section 3.2 on impacts for partnerships).

It's valued by partners because they say it brings us together. It actually improves our working relationships spending more time talking to each other. They felt that the exercise about auditing or looking at each other's case work was really useful.

(Divisional Manager)

Actually, the peer review feels inclusive, it's quite interesting for our staff [from Health] to be involved, it actually helped them to understand the process of children's services inspections a bit more.

(Associate Director, Health)

In a few instances, the level of prioritisation given to the review by partner agencies is of concern. Partners are typically represented in review activities by a small number of senior level staff and the involvement of those in operational level roles can be limited.

It might have been good to interview more of the safeguarding staff who actually manage the health safeguarding. We only really had the higher level staff

involved. If there was more time it would be better to interview more staff at an operational level to assess on the ground how they really work together with children's services.

(Associate Director, Health)

In some cases, while partners are willing to participate, their involvement is restricted by the timeframe for the peer review. The five day on-site visit can be insufficient to allow a wide range of staff from partner agencies to feedback to the review team. This is particularly the case for authorities which cover a wide geographical area. A health representative in one authority describes how the range of partners and the roles of professionals are selected to enable meaningful participation in the review. However, there may be implications for future partnership working where particular groups or individuals feel they are being excluded from the process.

The commissioners who commission our services weren't involved and they were slightly miffed. Actually, even though they are just commissioners they put in a lot of work to improve services and to make sure they are commissioning correctly. I understand where they were coming from but I also know there is limited time to see everybody.

(Associate Director, Health)

Levels of partnership involvement in safeguarding peer reviews are also determined by the very nature of what has been identified as the main focus for investigation. Where the focus is on a specific aspect of children services, for example, feedback from a wide range of partners may not be necessary. Engagement can also vary by the existing level of commitment to partnership working in a local authority. For some authorities, Improvement Notices set out the need to develop multi-agency working. This provides a useful driver to motivate partners to buy into the review process and encourage them to take ownership for the review outcomes and recommendations. Other interviewees suggest that the peer review methodology can potentially impede partnership buy-in as the approach is closely aligned to the Ofsted inspection framework rather than that of other bodies, such as the Care Quality Commission, which are more familiar and perhaps accessible to their partners.

We are trying to increase the way we work in partnership so it was good that we (Health) were more involved and we felt like we needed to take some responsibility for it as well. It's not just about social care, which is how it was seen in the past.

(Associate Director, Health)

It appeared to be a peer review that would assist with Ofsted rather than a holistic peer review. It felt like the county council was being peer reviewed rather than the council and its partners. The judgement is made on us as a county council but the implications and ramifications for the partners are not the same, they haven't got as much to lose.

(Head of HR)

Ensuring partners are made aware of the purpose and format of the safeguarding peer review helps to secure their involvement, but there is, however, sometimes uncertainty among some staff about whose role it is to share information about the review to partners. Local authorities implement various strategies to encourage the involvement of partners including: preparing tailored notes about the process for each partner agency, providing information about the review at existing multi-agency events, such as children's trust and LSCB meetings, and arranging specific peer review briefing meetings.

2.2.3 Effective features of a safeguarding children peer review

On the whole, interviewees report that the safeguarding peer review methodology works well and can be tailored sufficiently to the needs of a local authority in intervention. The key features considered to be of particular importance in shaping the success of the reviews can be classified under three main categories:

- the format and flexible nature of the review methodology
- the experience and approach of the peer review team
- organisational and contextual factors relating to the host local authority.

2.2.4 The format and flexible nature of the review methodology

The overall methodology used for conducting peer reviews, including its breadth of focus and flexible nature, is key to its success. The review framework builds upon a robust self assessment of performance; it probes particular areas of concern identified by staff and examines weaknesses highlighted in intervention plans and inspection reports. This approach helps to ensure the review is sufficiently tailored to the needs of the local authority. While key lines of enquiry are determined in advance of the review, the ability to steer the focus of the review team to specific issues as they arise during the on-site week is also helpful.

The amount of time spent on-site by the review team is generally considered to be sufficient to ensure that the findings of peers are informative and useful for the local authority. The peer review does not aim to examine safeguarding practice at a highly detailed level in the same way that formal inspections might. However, in one authority the review process was tailored to allow for a more focused review of social work practice. In this LA, a self-assessment was not completed in advance of the on-site visit and the review included an examination of individual cases. The ability to adapt the methodology in this way was seen as highly beneficial. This level of scrutiny is considered to be particularly valuable for authorities in intervention who are seeking a high level of challenge from the review in order to support their improvement journey.

The fact that some aspects of the peer review methodology are comparable in nature to those of formal inspections is of benefit to local authorities. The formal and rigorous nature of the review helps ensure it is taken seriously by staff and helps prepare them for forthcoming visits by Ofsted.

Part of the methodology has to also help people with the process of an Ofsted inspection. We need to have a bit of realism because actually we all want to do well in the formal inspection. It is no good having a peer review that is so disassociated from the things you are going to be measured against formally that it doesn't help you.

(Director)

Even though it wasn't an inspection, what it clearly does is allows you to behave in a certain way. You

know you have to do a specific amount of preparation so you start to behave in a way that you know you are going to be under some scrutiny. You start to think about having to present pieces of work and information.

(Head of Quality Assurance)

The format of the review, which focuses both the strengths and weaknesses of local authorities in relation to safeguarding children, helps foster feelings of openness and transparency amongst staff. Similarly, the ability to examine progress made in developing practice during the period of intervention, and providing feedback and recommendations on how to improve as well as what to improve provides a 'value added' dimension compared to other forms of inspection and scrutiny. This constructive approach also helps to ensure the review is a positive activity for all those involved.

It's very, very detailed, very interrogatory, in an unthreatening way and a different feeling to an inspection which it obviously isn't. It's designed to be helpful rather than seeking things that they can trap you with.

(Head of Children and Families)

Ofsted does tend to say, 'that's good, that's adequate and that's not good', whereas in a peer review we are getting really helpful suggestions about why the situation is possibly like that. You're getting this genuine advisor role alongside this inspection approach.

(Head of Children's Social Work)

Furthermore, the stipulation that a peer review captures views from a cross-section of staff, including partners, and those with strategic and operational roles is also helpful. The face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions, together with a multi-agency feedback session, create the necessary inclusive conditions required for an effective review. These activities are vital in order to bring staff together to focus on safeguarding and gain their collective agreement on priorities. They are also essential in helping to facilitate the necessary buy-in from the wider workforce required to bring about change.

For some authorities, a particularly effective feature of the safeguarding peer review methodology is the requirement that peers verbally present the findings

and recommendations of the review to a wide range of staff at a formal feedback session. The review lead, for example, might present difficult messages that are challenging for the local authority to voice publicly. These sessions also present an opportunity for dialogue with the review team, enabling staff to seek immediate clarification on issues identified in the review, should they need to. Where the feedback sessions work well, the content and approach to delivering key messages is agreed with the director of children's services, to avoid potential misunderstandings among attendees.

The focused and staged approach to safeguarding peer reviews is also considered to be an effective feature. Having a predetermined end point ensures that the feedback and findings of the review are current and appropriate. Indeed, the feedback session, which includes dedicated time to devise action plans around the review findings, is thought to be particularly helpful. These plans can then be presented to corporate leaders and intervention teams, for example, ensuring that issues and priorities are escalated in a formal and timely way.

2.2.5 The knowledge, experience and approach of the peer review team

There are a number of factors relating to the composition of safeguarding peer review teams, and the individual characteristics of peer reviewers themselves, which are important in ensuring a review works well. The gravitas of the peer review lead is key. This individual is usually a director of children's services and their level of authority is helpful in conveying the importance and credibility of the review. Both the status and reputation of the review lead helps to reassure staff and partners of the reliability of review findings and recommendations. Equally, their ability to effectively manage a team of peers who have not worked together previously is critical.

It is essential that review teams are appropriately composed of skilled professionals with relevant knowledge and experience relating to safeguarding children. Providing local authorities with the opportunity to select peers for the review ensures that the team is well matched to their needs. The range of perspectives offered by peers from a diverse range of backgrounds is perceived as a key strength of the

review process. In some cases, it is useful for the review team to have experience of working in authorities with similar circumstances, such as comparable geographical settings, type of authority and intervention status. In other instances, peers from authorities with contrasting profiles provide a valuable and distinct level of challenge.

Having (name of authority) here meant there was a certain level of empathy in the feedback and delivery which was good. You wouldn't get that if they'd not been in the same place once upon a time. The behaviour and the empathy displayed by the team was fantastic. Had an outstanding authority come in and judged us based on their perspective of where we were and where we need to be, it would have felt much more negative.

(Head of HR)

Partner agency and voluntary sector representation on the peer review team is considered to be particularly important. Not only is it crucial to gain their perspectives of local safeguarding performance, but their presence also helps to secure the buy-in of local partners in the review process. Equally, the participation of lead members brings an essential 'value added' perspective. Depending on the nature and focus of the review, review teams may also need to vary by the extent to which peers have operational or strategic level backgrounds.

We had a really good Lead Member doing our peer review and she was able to get alongside our members and talk about scrutiny and other things the way Ofsted couldn't have done. They observed things in a different way than inspectors and the dialogue with them was very useful.

(DCS)

A further key feature of an effective safeguarding peer review relates to the conduct of peers. Where reviews work well, peers are committed to the core principles and purpose of safeguarding peer reviews, they are well trained, prepared and familiar with local authority data and self-assessment materials in advance, and are dedicated, flexible and understanding during the on-site visit. Local authority staff are complimentary about the approach in which reviews are conducted referring to the process as a 'two-way dialogue'. Ensuring that the review team acts as a 'critical friend' to the local authority, rather than forming or delivering a

judgement is crucial. However, for authorities in intervention, the 'critical' analysis element of the review process is deemed to be an essential feature in supporting their improvement journey.

The way in which they approached us and the discussions which took place and the fact that people at the ground level all felt involved allowed us to explain what we were doing as well as the reviewers getting their information. So people felt very fired up and found it very positive.

(Head of Children and Families)

The interesting thing that came out from some of the conversations that people had had with the peer review team is that they came out and said that was really quite a difficult interview, it was a really interesting and professional discussion.

(Director)

2.2.6 Organisational and contextual factors relating to the host local authority

A local authority's commitment to an open and transparent safeguarding peer review is widely held to be a critical factor in determining its success. All staff involved must fully understand the purpose and nature of the review so that they can give open and honest feedback to peers without feeling there will be negative consequences for themselves or the local authority.

We didn't go into it in defensive mode, we went into it with a view that this was going to be the best consultancy we were going to get, and the best opportunity to get a real assessment about whether the things that we were doing were going to improve outcomes.

(Head of HR)

I wanted a warts and all review, I don't want a nice report. Unless we know what all the problems are we can't address them.

(Lead Member)

Planning and preparation for the review process is key, this includes the extent to which local authorities prioritise the completion of documentation such as self-assessment questionnaires, case-mapping exercises and the collation of documentation for peers ahead of

the review. The organisation of the on-site week and level of publicity afforded to the review, to ensure commitment across all local authority staff and partner agencies, is also vital.

Dedicating time to set up meetings and activities with the LGA programme manager and lead reviewer helps to ensure the focus of the review is appropriate and that the process itself is manageable. A number of local authority staff are themselves trained LGA peer reviewers and their familiarity with the review process is helpful in providing a level of understanding and awareness of how the review should be conducted.

2.2.7 Aspects of the safeguarding peer review process that work less well

Overall, very few interviewees identified aspects of the safeguarding peer review programme as challenges or limiting factors. Features perceived to work less well can be classified into four main categories:

- the timeframe of safeguarding peer reviews
- the level of detail of peer reviews
- the matching of peers and review teams to local authorities
- the feedback process.

The main concerns of local authorities relate to the extent to which safeguarding practice can be thoroughly investigated in the timeframe allowed and by the approach adopted. Some interviewees, for example, report there is insufficient time spent interviewing a wide enough range of staff to the required level of detail.

Concerns also extend to the amount of time given to 'reality checking' review findings by observing staff in their operational settings and by gathering feedback from service users. There is a view that peer review teams may simply be reiterating the views of staff rather than investigating in depth. Although the case file mapping exercise is helpful in drilling down to the key issues, in some instances there may be a need to examine individual cases in order to provide the

necessary level of analysis that is required by local authorities in intervention to improve.

The issue is that you could conceive a situation where authorities have the right policies, strategies, governance and structure and actually the cases could still be poor. And indeed our local authority has fallen down on that basis from time to time. To give complete reassurance you've got to cover that ground.

(DCS)

It's hard to go into detail with a peer review. When we had our Ofsted inspection, Ofsted picked up quite a few issues that the peer review hadn't, because they go straight into the detail and start looking at case files. There is a slight danger that they [peer reviews] can give you a false sense of security.

(Director)

A small number of interviewees commented on challenges relating to the amount of preparation required for a safeguarding peer review. This includes the collation of key documents and data in advance of the review and within a given timeframe, which adds significantly to the workload of individual staff and can be especially onerous in large authorities.

Other potentially limiting factors relate to the matching of peers and review teams to local authorities in intervention. In some instances, there is a reciprocal arrangement with other authorities, where staff undergoing a review also act as peers for their reviewing authority. Concerns relate to the implications this may have for the objectivity of the review team and the level of scrutiny and learning authorities in intervention can provide one another.

I think it does put a slightly different slant on it ... I feel, naturally, if you know someone is coming to look at you and you're looking at them, because of that relationship you could be overly optimistic.

(Director)

There are also concerns relating to unexpected and last minute changes made to the review teams when peers are no longer able to participate in the on-site review week. In some cases, peers are replaced by colleagues with different levels of experience and expertise, which affects the balance of the review team and potentially its effectiveness.

We ended up with a lot of unitary authority, London borough type people who didn't get what it was like to work in an area like ours where things are just different ... which meant their usefulness was impaired or they weren't seeing what the issues were for us and therefore might have misrepresented where we were at. I have no problem with the review having people from different authorities, that is entirely appropriate. We ended up with having just unitary authority people apart from the lead reviewer so it caused us a bit of an issue.

(Chief Executive)

A final limiting factor relates to peer review feedback and action planning activities. It is intended that feedback is provided to a wide audience including operational and strategic level staff as well as partners. However, it is challenging to deliver messages that focus on the inadequacies of individual groups or agencies in an open setting such as this. It is also difficult to discuss the fundamentals of an issue in the necessary depth in a multi-agency forum. A further concern relates to the ability of participants to effectively produce action plans immediately after receiving key findings of the review. The limited time for staff to consider and reflect on the key findings can prohibit the level of two-way dialogue. The level of commitment to action planning can also vary by the level of input given to it by key players, including the review team themselves.

2.2.8 The extent to which safeguarding peer reviews differ between local authorities who are, and who are not, in intervention

A previous NFER study, in 2011, focused on the process of safeguarding peer reviews and included five local authority case studies. Based on their Ofsted ratings, these areas were judged, at that time, to be performing better than local authorities involved in this current research. Comparing their feedback, there were very few differences between the two groups of local authorities in terms of their core aims and objectives for a safeguarding peer review. However, their circumstances were inevitably different and this distinction emerged in the extent to which authorities in intervention prioritised the focus of the peer review

on areas of weakness, compared to other authorities, not in intervention, who were perhaps more concerned with validating areas of good practice and preparing for Ofsted inspections. Despite these differences, the overall approach to safeguarding peer reviews is sufficiently flexible in its current form to allow authorities in intervention, and those who are not, to

achieve a successful outcome. It is important, however, that peer reviewers are sufficiently aware of the circumstances of the authority receiving the review and they may require support to tailor their approach to ensure the peer review methodology works well in different settings.

3 Impact of the peer review

Based on the interviews carried out across the five local authorities, this chapter discusses the impacts of the peer review for authorities in intervention. It explores the benefits of the peer review in:

- supporting corporate leaders
- promoting partnerships and collaborative working
- enhancing confidence
- helping develop frontline staff
- developing service provision for children, young people and families
- communicating developments to Ofsted and the Department for Education.

The chapter also looks at the perceived added value of the peer review for authorities with a Notice to Improve and examines areas of unexpected or negative impact. The last section compares the findings of this research with NFER's previous evaluation of the safeguarding children peer review programme (See Martin and Jeffes, 2011). It discusses differences in impact for authorities with an Improvement Notice (the focus of this study) and those that are performing well (who were involved in the 2011 study).

While local authorities with a Notice to Improve are very positive about the peer review and speak widely of its benefits, it is difficult to isolate the impact of the peer review programme specifically. Authorities with an Improvement Notice receive multifaceted support and several interviewees noted the difficulty of attributing impact to one specific intervention for LAs that have a number of mechanisms supporting them on their improvement journey. These include, for example, an Improvement Board, six monthly reviews from DfE and other bespoke support packages (such as external sector-specialist consultancy). One LSCB Chair while describing the benefit of the peer review also observes the difficulty of attributing impact to one intervention:

There is no doubt about it ... the peer review will have an impact but separating the detail of that is going to be difficult with all the processes going. It has its place amongst a suite of things. A peer review does bring something extra because it is invited in; it feels more personal and more constructive than kind of hit and run Ofsted approach. It's more owned by the authority. You can influence things.

(LSCB Chair)

While all interviewees are positive about the impact of the peer review, it is within this context that this chapter should be read.

3.1 Supporting corporate leaders

The impact of the peer review to local authority corporate leaders can be categorised into four main themes. The peer review is said to have a positive impact on: politicians; children's services; Health and Well-Being Boards and LSCB arrangements; and, on honing the LA's safeguarding priorities and improvement planning.

3.1.1 Developing the role of local politicians

In all authorities, the peer review has a positive effect on the political leaders in two ways. Firstly, the review helps cabinet members realise their roles and responsibilities and any shortfalls in their knowledge and understanding of safeguarding children. Secondly, peer reviews provide reassurance to councillors that their LA's direction of travel is correct.

As a result of the peer review within one LA, for example, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee now work directly with social workers to better understand child protection issues. They undertake visits and work with social care colleagues to better understand their practice and safeguarding children issues. In another LA where the peer review

team gave lead members specific areas for improvement around scrutiny and challenge, the DCS explains the value of having external peers providing such feedback:

... [peer reviewers] said to the members 'you're not being focussed enough in what you're scrutinising' and the members found that quite difficult but they took it really seriously because another peer member was saying it. If I had said it they would have said 'who's he?' but it had more credibility.

(DCS)

Furthermore, one interviewee explains that the peer review helps get councillors' 'minds in the right place' which ended up being particularly useful when they had an unannounced inspection shortly after the peer review.

In addition to highlighting shortfalls in knowledge and offering practical skill development, peer reviews give all councillors confidence, validation and credibility to the LA that their progress to date is on track and in the right direction. Councillors have confidence that the LA is moving forward and will continue on its progress journey in the future. LA senior managers, many of who were brought into the authority to help it move out of intervention, appreciate the external validation provided by the peer review.

3.2 Supporting partnership working arrangements

Across all five local authorities the peer review is supporting developments between the LA, the Health and Well-being Board and the LSCB. While each of the LAs had been working to improve the leadership of the safeguarding board and develop working arrangements between the LA and the Health and Well-being Board, the peer review offered timely and specific feedback to enhance work in this area. As one interviewee explains:

... by the time the peer review came we were well into our thinking about the Health and Well-being Board and so we focused more on the relationship between the Safeguarding Board and the new Health and Well-being Board rather than the old Children's Trust ... we talked about structure and governance arrangements quite a lot which we were actually right in the middle of thinking about so that was helpful. We also talked

about connections across children's and adults services and that's also very valuable.

(DCS)

In another LA, the peer review is said to have made the chair of the LSCB realise their 'inadequacies' resulting in them trying to 'make amends'. In a third authority, the peer review confirmed to the LSCB that it is in a position to offer support and challenge to the authority in the future and once the Improvement Board has gone. These examples show the varied impacts of the peer review on strategic improvement and development as well as person-specific areas of enhancement for those leading the local safeguarding children agenda.

3.2.1 Promoting partnerships and collaborative working

By the very nature of local authorities being on an Improvement Notice, partners are generally well engaged on that journey. As a result, local authorities are positive about partner engagement in the preparatory self-assessment work, during review data collection exercises and in the post-review feedback and planning sessions. Bringing agencies together for the purpose of the review heightens the debate and partners' awareness around safeguarding children. That said, a very small number of interviewees' comments relate to some partners (for example, health in one LA and the police in another) not viewing the peer review as having as much resonance or credibility as Ofsted. Within these two LAs, partner representatives involved in the review were not senior leaders and this was viewed as disappointing by the local authority.

Local authority interviewees feel that the peer review helps promote a shared responsibility for safeguarding children amongst the LA and its partners. Specifically, comments around the peer review include that it helps:

- reiterate to partners that safeguarding is a shared responsibility
- corroborate to partners that they are on the right track with safeguarding
- affirms the relationships and working practices between the LA and partners

- gives credibility to LA's decision making
- highlight areas where the LA and partners need to develop further
- encourage joint future planning.

3.2.2 Improving policy and practice between the LA and partners

Within three local authorities, the peer review team highlighted specific areas where partner engagement within the safeguarding children agenda needs improvement. The peer review is said to give LA senior leaders the evidence (and confidence) to talk to partners about specific areas for improvement. Within one LA, for example, the peer review gave the LA the impetus and leverage to talk to their partners in the police force about better information sharing. In another, the peer review is promoting better working with health and as a result of the peer review the LA has secured additional funding for ongoing peer support to help health colleagues better understand their role and responsibilities. Furthermore, the LA is working with health colleagues to ensure named professionals for safeguarding are in post too. One interviewee explains the importance of the peer review in helping the authority engage its partners in the safeguarding agenda:

It demonstrated a need for partners to step up. It was another opportunity for us to articulate to senior leadership and partners that the directorate on its own cannot be the sole solution to some of these systematic problems. It is again another opportunity to publicise and give clarity that [the peer review] was a partnership resolution.

(Head of HR)

3.2.3 Local authority service developments

Further to supporting authorities' developments around the Health and Well-being Board and safeguarding boards, the peer review also helps confirm (and/or reconstruct) future service developments. Within two authorities the peer review team gave feedback that directly informed the LA's service provision. For one

authority, the review affirmed the LA's proposed restructure changes around their children in need service. Regardless of the peer review, the LA notes changes would have been made but the DCS comments that the added value of the peer review is that it helped refine their thinking; it bolstered the need for the changes and gave them confidence that they had identified the right areas for improvement. In another authority the peer review identified that the LA needs to give greater clarity to the level of information given to the Improvement Board and plans are afoot to ensure this happens in the future. These examples highlight the importance of the timing of the peer review on an authority's improvement journey.

3.2.4 Honing safeguarding priorities

The benefits of the safeguarding peer review extends to helping local authorities and its partners further refine, focus and concentrate on its identified priority areas. This is a common theme emerging across all authorities with interviewees describing how the peer review helped them to re-prioritise some areas for improvement. For authorities with a notice to improve whereby they have many areas for development highlighted, the peer review reflection and challenge methodology gives authorities the opportunity to re-examine their priorities and tweak the order of improvement actions.

3.2.5 Fast tracking change

While authorities were progressing well with their improvement journey prior to the peer review, to some extent the peer review is found to fast track progress. These relate to service development, partnership arrangements and changing the leadership structure at the corporate level. As one DCS explains when talking about setting up a new service:

Things would have happened anyway but the peer review reinforced the need to do that and we are doing that more quickly than we probably would have done otherwise.

(DCS)

Other interviewees' comments echoed this view.

3.2.6 Policies and procedures

The research team asked interviewees how the peer review impacts on policy and procedures for authorities in intervention. While the focus of the peer review for authorities within a Notice to Improve is more on informing their strategic direction within some authorities, the peer review is said to explicitly link to informing policy and procedures. For example, LAs ensure that the peer review findings are explicitly linked to their policy and procedural documents. Within one authority, however, the peer review team stated that when potentially serious cases emerge, staff need to act more quickly to protect children and not necessarily follow protocol. Furthermore, the IT systems in this LA will be examined in the future to better support the work and responsiveness of frontline staff.

3.3 Enhancing confidence

One of the principal themes emerging from the data is the positive impact that the peer review has on the attitudes and confidence of LA staff (from corporate leaders to frontline staff), partner organisations, Improvement Boards and local safeguarding boards. Overwhelmingly, councillors', senior leaders' and operational managers agree that staffs' and partners' confidence surrounding the LA's safeguarding children agenda and improvement journey improves following a peer review. The external validation and the critical and thorough look at the authority's progress to date, boosts the morale, motivation and confidence of many staff. Even for those not directly involved in the peer review, the LAs share the findings with colleagues, partners and external committees and boards with oversight for improvement. Specific examples of how the peer review has a positive effect on attitudes and confidence include:

- giving confidence to the Chief Executive and elected members that the financial investment in the improvement agenda has been worthwhile
- ensuring senior leaders communicate their direction of travel and progress to date with their staff
- helping 'cement thoughts' and focus the minds of senior leaders and operational managers

- re-engaging staff with the improvement agenda across the LA and in partner organisations
- providing a re-energised impetus for improvement
- boosting the morale of frontline staff who are being worked hard and have had, as one interviewee said, 'a battering' from Ofsted.

The DCS in one authority comments that the peer review gives him the confidence to share his vision for the future and to implement his desired changes. Supported by the evidence in the peer review, he had the necessary leverage to instigate change with partners. In another LA, for example, the DCS said he was able to explain to his staff that developments to their early intervention and prevention service are essential;

[changes are] *non-negotiable, this has got to happen and the peer review helped me in doing that.*

(DCS)

Not only did the peer review provide validation around the LA's vision but it also provided feedback to the senior leaders from those on the ground. One interviewee said:

it actually gave confidence and evidence that the staff valued the focus of your efforts.

(Head of HR)

For others the peer review provides validation to managers and staff that the areas in which they are working hard and instigating change, often at a fast pace, is along the right lines.

3.3.1 Next steps on the improvement journey

Furthermore, the peer review gives local authorities the confidence to look to the future and think about the next steps in their improvement journey. Within one LA for example, interviewees felt that they could have moved to the next step in their journey a few months earlier but wanted to validation from an external group of experts that they were moving in the right direction. The peer review provided this validation and confirmed to that it was the right time to proceed. A head of

service explains the value of the peer review when looking to the next stage on their journey:

First of all it confirmed that we are ready to move to stage two, and the second thing, which is really good for me, was that it slightly shifted what stage two is. I had a particular view about what stage two was and the peer review both confirmed what stage two should be about but also shifted it as well.

(Head of Service)

He goes on to describe how the peer review continues to support the LA:

I use the findings remorselessly with the members [and] with partners to make sure that it is not a one-off event that dies in the grass. It [provides] ongoing reference, challenge and focus.

(Head of Service)

In another authority the review gave the Safeguarding Board the confidence and validation it needed to continue to challenge and help the LA improve once the Improvement Board ceased. Furthermore, it helped raise the aspirations of the LA on its improvement journey.

Despite these positive benefits to managers' and staff's confidence, some interviewees argue that the changes would have happened without the peer review but that the confidence it brought helped them on their journey.

3.4 Helping develop frontline staff

While the explicit aim of the peer reviews was rarely to look at frontline staff, interviewees gave examples of how the review had made a difference in this area. Within one authority, for example, the peer review highlighted areas of underperformance with two managers. The peer review provided the LA and its human resources department with external evidence to fast-track competency procedures. The subsequent consequences are summarised by one assistant director:

[Name of service] has seen managers move out, we've implemented a very robust development programme for staff. The peer review team described this service as having a 'bunker mentality' and it

almost seems like a flower starting to open now. We're starting to look outwards. We've brought two new senior managers in that have made a significant difference already so quite a lot of investment in that service. I think it has affected frontline working and the morale in that service has already improved.

(Assistant Director)

For frontline staff in authorities with a Notice to Improve, the positive impact of the peer review on staff's morale is a recurring finding across all authorities.

The format of the peer review, which focuses on asking questions and providing challenge and reflection, results in LAs replicating these qualities. Managers and staff have to 'stop and think' which promotes reflection and outcomes focused behaviours. This starts at the outset of the peer review during self assessment, and as one interviewee explains, this has led the LA to introduce their own case auditing where they state outcomes and share the impact. One director explains:

... the fact that we had to be thinking about it meant that people were thinking about the service in a different way. So it sort of forced people to stand back and reflect a little.

(Director)

3.4.1 Workforce development issues

The peer review highlights workforce development issues to authorities to assist them on their improvement journey. Across the five authorities involved in our research, all received feedback on improving frontline practice and areas for skill development. On the whole, these relate to case files and supervision. The review team emphasised a lack of evidence within case files in effectively showing a child's journey and outcome measures. For one authority, a clear case chronology was lacking, in others the quality of case files often required development. Even where practice was effective, case files did not sufficiently evidence a child's journey – something that will become increasingly prevalent in Ofsted inspections in the future. As a result of this finding, LAs introduced training to support staff's understanding of chronology and in recording outcomes.

Peer reviews also draw LAs' attention to the quality of supervision. While generally supervision was highlighted as providing good support, there was room for improvement in ensuring managers provide staff with enough challenge. Within one authority they have undertaken to involve frontline staff in case auditing. Directly involving staff in case audits makes them feel more involved in the auditing process and it provides the opportunity to discuss and learn from their decisions. Managers feel it is helping staff learn through the process and apply their learning to future situations. Within this authority, reportedly 'Staff are saying it really made a difference to my development.' Other authorities are overcoming skill shortfalls by inviting specialist support into their authority through 'sector-led specialists', for example. This was a direct result of the peer review in one LA.

3.4.2 Innovative practice and learning

Interviewees were asked how, if at all, the peer review has introduced innovative practice or learning. Overwhelmingly, interviewees agreed that the focus of the peer review was a sense check of strategic progress rather than around implementing new ways of working *per se*. What the peer review does do, however, is provide the opportunity for collaborative peer to peer support after the review. For example in a number of authorities, service managers have the opportunity to visit the reviewer's LA to see effective work in practice.

3.5 Developing service provision for children, young people and families

The research team wanted to explore the impact of the peer review on service users. However, in all authorities, the peer review did not have an explicit focus on children or families. Most interviewees, therefore, said they were unable to comment or stated that the LA is doing lots to improve outcomes but that the peer review did not have a direct impact specifically. Overall, however, interviewees argue that the very nature of improving corporate leadership and service provision would ultimately have a positive impact on children, young people and families.

While most authorities said the peer review did not have an explicit impact on service users, within four

LAs the peer review team highlighted that although there has been progress, the LA needs to better engage with service users. For one LA it reiterated the importance of social workers seeing children on their own, for example. All four local authorities had plans in place to address the engagement of service users and the safeguarding children peer review has helped further inform their work.

In three authorities the peer review helped the LA further develop their early intervention and prevention service provision. Although plans were in place in all three authorities to review or change provision, interviewees said that the peer review helps offer information, advice and ideas to better meet the needs of children who did not meet the threshold for social care intervention. It identified the need for greater clarity and understanding around the early intervention and prevention agenda and, in one LA, the use of common assessments. One interviewee explained, 'The peer review quickened the pace; it refocused [the early help and support agenda] and moved it up the priority list.'

Others described how getting an 'inadequate' rating for safeguarding can result in LAs focusing their efforts on that provision to the detriment of others. One assistant director describes how the peer review helped the authority realise improvements were needed to its looked after children service, for example:

... what had happened was that when the Improvement Notice was put in place it was following an inspection that had found safeguarding 'inadequate' and looked after children 'adequate' and so all the investment, resources and support went into safeguarding to the neglect of the looked after service. It was a very difficult message to get because it was very focused on this service not operating it effectively.

(Assistant Director)

3.6 Communicating with Ofsted and DfE

All local authorities shared their peer review findings with their Improvement Board, which has DfE representation. Furthermore, some DCSs have used the peer review findings in reports to the Minister and others have shared the findings with Ofsted. All LAs agree that the peer review findings have been well

received by the Improvement Board and the DfE colleagues sitting on these boards. Within one LA, for example, the Improvement Board had previously raised concerns about the fast pace of change with the LA's safeguarding agenda. When the peer review team visited, they acknowledged that change has happened quickly and that the LA needs to ensure it is sustainable longer term but gave reassurance that efforts are focused in the right areas. They also confirmed that the authority has support in place to maintain improvement in the future through its safeguarding board. This finding gave the Improvement Board reassurance and validation that the LA was heading in the right direction.

Four of the five local authorities have had an inspection since the peer review. In all of these LAs, Ofsted inspectors wanted to see the peer review findings but one DCS commented that the inspectors were 'sniffy' about the peer review and did not really want to look at the evidence. This is in contrast to the experiences of the other authorities where the inspectors were interested in the findings. LAs took confidence that the inspection found similar findings to the peer review in highlighting areas that had improved and areas that required further development. In fact, one DCS commented that the Ofsted findings were more positive than the peer review team, but that this is not a criticism as he wanted the peer review to shine a very 'hard light' on the LA. One DCS said of the process:

If we hadn't had the peer review we would still have had a positive unannounced [inspection] but having had the peer review we were able to give the peer review to Ofsted which they took as evidence. It was very useful evidence for us because it was a very credible piece of work.

(DCS)

Another interviewee raised the question of ownership of the peer review findings when Ofsted want to see the self-assessment and review output. He noted that the approach a LA might take to the peer review self-assessment may be different from that for an inspection. He felt that within the peer review 'safe' environment, LAs may share more 'dirty washing' than they would usually share with Ofsted. He hoped that inspectors' desire to see peer review self-assessment and reports would not affect LAs' levels of openness or honesty.

3.7 Longevity of the peer review feedback

For authorities with a Notice to Improve, planning for the future beyond their Improvement Board can seem like a long way off. The safeguarding children peer review, however, helps these authorities think about the future and develop a longer term vision as one DCS explains:

... it was also very good at getting people to think about life after intervention so beginning to prepare for that landscape, which is something that we haven't done or given a lot of attention to because we have been so focused about getting out rather than once we are out what do we need to do. What will it need to look like ... that has been a real strength ... it has helped us to look at the horizon rather than at our feet.

(DCS)

A chief executive also explains the importance of the peer review longer term:

You have to plan for the future to keep the momentum going otherwise you will go into a dip the other side of intervention and there is a risk that you slip back if you do that.

(Chief Executive)

For all authorities, the peer review has the added impact of enabling senior leaders to use the findings long after the five day process. The review has longevity in that authorities use the feedback letters and PowerPoint reports to develop future plans. The reports are used as a reference and/or working documents within the authorities during away days, business planning and service development meetings. The peer review findings are also cross-referenced to priorities and used alongside Ofsted reports to triangulate areas for development. One chief executive explains:

We have come out with a clearer view of how to make our existing plan work better. So we have been able to build the response into our existing plan and start other pieces of work that are less about our immediate improvement and more about our long term development as a Children's Services authority. ... The review has helped us to know what improvement looks like and to begin to build it.

(Chief Executive)

Not only do the findings have permanence within the LAs, but so do the relationships between the review team authorities and the authority with the Notice to Improve. Interviewees cite examples of lead members offering mentoring support to each other, service managers visiting the lead reviewer's authority to see their frontline practice or performance management processes in place. The pairing of authorities is particularly important in these situations as senior leaders want to visit an authority with similar structures and that is of comparable size. As one head of service states:

I continued dialogue with one of the peers thereafter about our workforce development tools we shared, and as a result of that, we've probably both come up with something that's hybrid that's better than the individual elements. It didn't stop at the peer review – I personally established a network to discuss workforce planning.

(Head of Service)

This shows the extended benefits of the peer review in that, even for authorities with a Notice to Improve, reciprocal learning still takes place. One lead member notes, 'I think that they took away as much as they brought.'

3.8 Unexpected or negative impacts of the peer review

The peer review did not highlight any significant unexpected or negative findings to the local authorities. Indeed, a number of interviewees commented that they would have been very concerned if the review had highlighted areas of significant concern given where they were on their improvement journey. By contrast, two DCSs noted that the peer review team was more positive in its outcomes than they had anticipated.

Two LAs explain there were small unexpected outcomes associated with the peer review. For one authority, although they were aware of the issues, this related to the work with one key partner. The peer review highlighted the 'starkness' of the issues and reawakened the collective responsibility of the LA in offering internal challenge and support to this particular partner around children's safeguarding. In another authority where the members were told they

needed to better understand and engage with child protection practice, the peer review messages 'sent members into a bit of a spin because they didn't hear the positives. And as often happens, they went straight to the negatives. We spent quite a lot of time managing our own members following the peer review and managing that message'.

3.9 Overview of peer review impacts for authorities with an Improvement Notice

In summary, while it can be difficult to attribute change directly to one intervention, the perceived impacts of the peer review can be categorised into three broad headings:

- leadership and vision
- attitudes, experiences and confidence
- changes to practice and procedure.

Areas of impact can be attributed to three stakeholder groups:

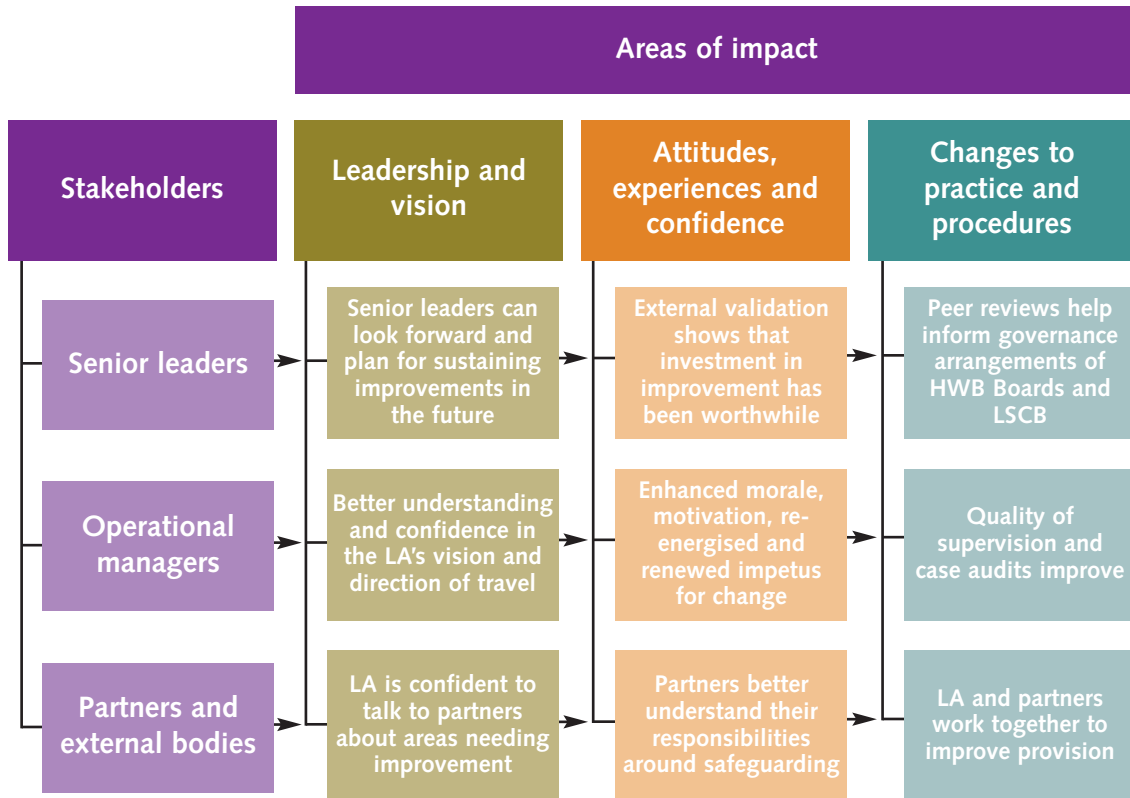
- LA senior leaders
- operational managers
- partners and external bodies.

Examples of the different areas of impact following a peer review are displayed overleaf in Figure 3.1: 'Areas of impact'.

Moreover, the findings from this research corroborate those from the previous safeguarding peer review study (Martin and Jeffes, 2011). The peer review programme is shown to have several areas of impacts for authorities with a Notice to Improve; similar impacts are also evident for authorities doing well with the safeguarding agenda. For both types of authorities, the peer review is shown to:

- increase commitment and drive to improve
- inform, support and legitimise the development of plans, actions, policies and systems

Figure 3.1 Areas of impact



- promote learning and reflective practice
- improve staff morale and relations
- affirm and enhance the quality of partnership working
- help LA, council and partner senior leaders understand safeguarding children issues and how to overcome areas of weakness
- provide the opportunity to develop longer term relationships between the peer review team and the LA receiving the review.

Overall, the peer review has a positive impact on authorities, councils and partners. Suggestions for further development to the programme are discussed in the next chapter.

This chapter summarises the key areas of consideration for authorities in intervention thinking about embarking on a safeguarding peer review and for the LGA in further developing the programme.

The findings of this study complement and reinforce those of previous studies (Pettigrew and Schroeder, 2010 and Martin and Jeffes, 2011) looking at the safeguarding peer review programme. These findings will be valuable to the LGA in supporting the programme's future development. Overall, the findings of the study suggest that the peer review can be extremely helpful to authorities with a Notice to Improve in supporting them on their journey to better safeguarding children. While the findings are typically positive, there are areas for further improvement and future development to ensure the programme can best meet the needs of authorities on a journey out of intervention.

4 Future developments and recommendations

4.1 Advice to local authorities contemplating involvement in a peer review

The children's services sector view a safeguarding peer review as a positive experience and local authority personnel who have participated in the peer review programme highly recommend it to others. When contemplating involvement in a peer review, the following areas are identified for consideration:

- Embrace the peer review process: understand the key aims and principles of a safeguarding peer review and accept that its aims and purpose are different from an inspection, such as Ofsted.
- Ensure buy-in from corporate leaders, partners, senior leaders and independent boards: senior leaders within the LA and across partner agencies alongside the Improvement Board, LSCB, Health and Well-being Boards and others must champion the LA's involvement in a safeguarding peer review. Colleagues in senior positions should be actively involved in preparing for and being part of the review. Furthermore, the LA, leaders and partners should collectively develop a plan for taking on board the review team's recommendations.
- Establish a key focus: be specific about the aims and purpose of the peer review and ensure its focus is not too broad. Seek an appropriate balance between a critical appraisal of aspects of safeguarding which are viewed to be working well, and those areas that require improvement.
- Consider the timing: ensure the peer review takes place at an appropriate point in time and complements the timeframes of formal inspection processes. Ensure the timeframe fits for all partners and not just at the LA level to maximise engagement.
- Ensure an appropriate peer review team: develop transparent selection criteria for the peer review team in terms of their professional status, related experience and the type of LA in which they are used to working. In making your selections, consider selecting a back-up lead reviewer, in case individuals are unavailable or have to pull out at short notice.
- Allow for sufficient preparation: support staff in making time available to collect the required information in advance of the review.
- Communicate clearly to all involved: be clear to staff at all levels, including those in partner agencies, about the purpose of the review, its importance and the potential implications of its outcomes for the LA and partners in ensuring children are safeguarded.
- Adopt an open approach: be receptive to the scrutiny of peers and encourage staff not to conceal areas of weakness.
- Manage the message: envisage how the feedback might be used and potentially misapplied. Be proactive in preparing local authority staff and partner agencies to receive and respond to the review findings with a can-do approach.
- Action the findings: secure ongoing commitment to, and prioritisation of, the implementation of the peer review's recommendations.

4.2 Areas for consideration

While overall the programme meets the needs of authorities on an improvement journey, the LGA could consider the following areas when thinking about the future development of the programme:

- Work with the DfE to clarify their expectations for authorities with a notice to improve, to have a peer review: DfE's expectation around the use of the peer review for authorities in intervention needs to be clarified and its implications carefully considered. Authorities that want an honest and open exploration of their safeguarding issues by peers in a 'safe environment' may not be as transparent if the peer review is imposed on them.
- Explain the ownership arrangements of the peer review findings between the LA, its partners and inspectorial bodies: Further to clarifying the expectations of DfE, the LGA should also clarify the Freedom of Information Act status and ownership of the peer review reports for authorities in intervention, as some interviewees expressed confusion around this issue.
- Clarify the appropriateness of a 'one size fits all' peer review programme methodology: In revising the current methodology, the LGA should ensure that the peer review for authorities with a Notice to Improve has enough flexibility to meet their desire for a strategic sense check of progress. For these authorities, the LGA may also like to consider revising its policy and asking review teams to look at a small number of live case files. Furthermore, the review team needs to be fit for purpose in relation to their safeguarding experience, authority and credibility.
- Support senior leaders' engagement in the peer review: LGA has a role in promoting the importance and benefits of the peer review programme to LA corporate leaders, councillors and senior executives in partner agencies. The peer review for authorities with a Notice to Improve requires senior buy-in and commitment across the LA, council and partner organisations for improvements in safeguarding to be driven forward and embedded in the future.
- Support the lead reviewer and LA to plan follow-up activity: LGA might want to consider introducing the opportunity for authorities to have a further day of follow-up support (in addition to the one day follow-up visit offered within 12 months). This might comprise an on-site action-planning day where the Lead Reviewer runs a session with the key officers and partners, as an example.
- Promoting the benefit of the peer reviews to other authorities, partners and independent boards: LGA should consider working with peer review teams and LAs receiving a review to develop a small number of case study pieces. These would support the LGA and authorities considering a peer review to see where it has worked well and find out about what LAs have put in place to better safeguard children.
- Establish a formal evaluation and quality assurance framework: QA and evaluation procedures surrounding the safeguarding children peer review programme are currently unclear (to the LAs participating in this study). LGA should clarify to LAs that the peer review training is evaluated and formal feedback on review team members is sought from DCSs that received a peer review. Furthermore, the LGA might want to consider streamlining its evaluation processes to ensure LAs are not asked to provide feedback on similar issues to the LGA and to independent evaluators.

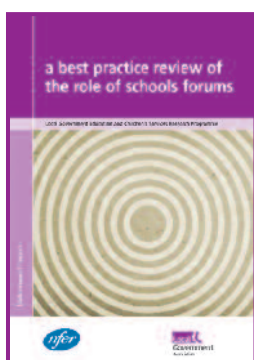
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Recently published reports

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/



A best practice review of the role of schools forums

The findings from this review indicate that schools forums were generally perceived to have a strong influence on funding decisions by providing a platform for discussion at the strategic level about funding decisions at the local level. Their effectiveness was characterised by connected, proactive and child-centered behaviour.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGSF01



Hidden talents: a statistical overview of the participation patterns of young people aged 16–24

This report offers a start point for the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned research to inform the Hidden Talents programme. It reviews available statistics, data and commentary to establish what can be reasonably deduced to inform policy in response to young people aged 16–24 years who are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGHT01



Early intervention: informing local practice

The findings from this review of literature shows that the case for investing in early intervention approaches to improve outcomes for children and families and in bringing about cost savings in the longer term is widely accepted and supported. More needs to be done within the UK to identify and evidence the extent of potential cost savings, this will help enable policy makers and local commissioners to make informed commissioning decisions.

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For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk, web: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications.

The Local Government Association (LGA) and Children's Improvement Board (CIB) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an evaluation of the Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews.

This report explores the impact of the peer review process on authorities with a Notice to Improve, including:

- supporting corporate leaders and partnership working arrangements
- enhancing confidence and developing frontline staff
- developing provision for children, young people and families.

In addition, the report includes advice to local authorities contemplating involvement in a peer review and areas for further consideration.