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safeguarding children: council developments

Kerry Martin
Mary Atkinson
Richard White

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

In March 2009, Lord Laming published the findings of a review investigating the progress being made across the UK to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children. Laming made 58 recommendations to ensure that services are as effective as possible at working together to achieve positive outcomes for children. The Government accepted all of Lord Laming's recommendations and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published its response in *The Protection of Children in England: Action Plan* (DCSF, 2009).

In June 2010, Professor Eileen Munro was commissioned by the Coalition Government to conduct an independent review of child protection in England. Munro suggested that 'good practice thrives' in many parts of the country despite the numerous system-level challenges that are yet to be resolved (Munro, 2010, p.42). In May 2011, Munro published her final report *A Child-Centred System*, and recommended that local areas should have more freedom to design their own child protection services (Munro, 2011, p.106). In July 2011, the Department for Education (DfE) published its response to Munro's recommendations setting out actions to reduce central regulation and prescription, and place greater trust and responsibility in skilled professionals and local leaders (DfE, 2011).

A scoping study (Atkinson, 2010) and literature review (Martin *et al.*, 2010), carried out by the NFER for the Local Government Group (LG Group), set out relevant literature on developments in safeguarding practices published since the Laming review in 2009. At that time, the published literature depicting changes in safeguarding practices post-Laming was somewhat limited. This report aims to enhance that evidence base and provide further understanding of how local authorities have and continue to develop their safeguarding practices in a changing policy landscape.

Five local authorities were selected for the study. They range from 'adequate' to 'outstanding' in their recent safeguarding and looked after children inspections and offer a range of perspectives and approaches to safeguarding practices depending on local circumstances and priorities. Telephone interviews were conducted with a small number of senior officers at tiers 1–3 in each authority. Interviews were carried out between February and May 2011, and interviewees were asked to provide feedback on what they perceive to be key developments in safeguarding practices in their local authority during the last two years.

Across the five case-study local authorities, the main priority areas for improving safeguarding, identified by interviewees, include:

- leadership and management

- recruiting, maintaining and retaining a highly competent workforce

- quality assurance and performance management

- referral and assessment processes and procedures

- partnership working.

This report provides details of how safeguarding practices have been improved in these priority areas. It gives localised accounts of practice implementation and, where possible, evidence of outcomes.

Across the five case-study areas, specific conditions and factors influenced the improvement of safeguarding practices:

- the commitment of local authority leaders

- the facilitating approach of strategic and operational managers

- existing structures underpinning partnership working

- workforce attitudes and characteristics

- specific local authority contexts and circumstances.

Interviewees identified a small number of barriers and challenges to improving safeguarding across the case-study local authorities. These centred on:

- process and systemic challenges

- challenges to partnership working

- external constraints.

Supporting the findings of Munro (2010), good and emerging practice is evident among the five case-study local authorities despite current difficult economic times and system-level challenges. This study presents evidence that suggests safeguarding continues to be a high priority for local authorities. Furthermore, local authorities have or are developing the necessary structures, systems and effective working cultures to support continued reform of child protection.

1 Safeguarding policy context

The publication of the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper by the Labour Government (HM Treasury, 2003), alongside the formal response to the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), provided drivers for change both in the organisation and delivery of children's services and the positioning of child protection within a wider safeguarding agenda. The Children Act (England and Wales. Statutes, 2004) set out the *Every Child Matters* outcomes in statute and strengthened the legal framework to protect children from harm. This included a requirement that local authorities combine their children's social care and education services into children's services, and establish local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) with representation from all agencies involved in improving outcomes for children and young people.

In 2006, the Government published *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DCSF, 2006). This statutory guidance set out how organisations and individuals should work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. The following year, *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF, 2007) was published setting out objectives for improving the well-being, safety, health and education of children and young people by 2020.

In March 2009, Laming published the findings of a review investigating the progress being made across the UK to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children. The review was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in response to the case of Peter Connelly, known as Baby Peter, being made public in November 2008. It stated the need for 'a step change in the arrangements to protect children from harm' (Laming, 2009, p.4). Laming made 58 recommendations to ensure services are as effective as possible at working together to achieve positive outcomes for children. The Government accepted all of Laming's recommendations and, in May 2009, detailed its response in *The Protection of Children in England: Action Plan* (DCSF, 2009). In March 2010, the statutory

guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2010), was updated, addressing 23 of Laming's recommendations.

Previous research by the NFER for the Local Government Association (LGA) concluded that local authorities are broadly supportive of the principles underpinning the Laming review. However, the degree to which they are likely to be able to make changes is contingent upon a range of workforce developments and resolving resourcing issues (MacLeod *et al.*, 2010). Research by Loughborough University, also on behalf of the LGA, similarly indicated that there are capacity issues for local authorities in implementing Laming's recommendations. In particular, local authorities have capacity issues that make it difficult for them to fulfil the recommendation that all referrals into social care should lead to an initial assessment (Holmes *et al.*, 2010).

In June 2010, Munro was commissioned by the Government to conduct an independent review of child protection in England. Interim review papers were published in October 2010 and January 2011. In the first of these, Munro suggested that 'good practice thrives' in many parts of the country despite the numerous system-level challenges that are yet to be resolved (Munro, 2010, p.42). In May 2011, Munro published *A Child-Centred System*, and recommended that local areas should have more freedom to design their own child protection services. She concluded that a 'one-size-fits-all approach' to child protection prevents local areas from focusing on the needs of the child (Munro, 2011, p.106). In July 2011, the Government published its response to Munro's recommendations to reform the child protection system. The DfE's response (DfE, 2011) sets out actions to reduce central regulation and prescription, and place greater trust and responsibility in skilled professionals and local leaders to bring about long-term reform. The actions include giving professionals more freedom and responsibility for improving their skills in helping children and young people.

An initial scoping study (Atkinson, 2010) and literature review (Martin *et al.*, 2010) carried out by the NFER for the Local Government Group (LG Group), set out relevant literature on developments in safeguarding practices published since the Laming review in 2009. At that time, the published literature depicting changes in safeguarding practices post-Laming was somewhat limited. This report aims to enhance the evidence base and provide further understanding of how local authorities have developed their safeguarding practices in a changing policy landscape, and are continuing to do so.

2 The research study

The overarching purpose of this study is to highlight key learning from recent developments in safeguarding practices in local authorities. The specific aims are to:

- identify English local authorities that have improved or maintained their performance in the area of safeguarding

- highlight recent safeguarding developments in a sample of five local authorities

- extract relevant learning for the sector, including any associated challenges and enabling factors.

2.1 Identification and sampling of local authorities

Ofsted and the Quality Care Commission initiated a new programme of local authority safeguarding and looked after children (LAC) inspections in 2009. At the time this research study was initiated, in January 2011, not all local authorities had been subject to this form of inspection. Of those that had undergone the new inspection, the research team obtained their grade for 'the overall effectiveness of safeguarding services'. This grade was then compared to the local authority's previous annual performance assessment (APA) grade for the category of 'staying safe'. Whilst these are different types of inspections, improvements in grade are indicative of positive changes in safeguarding practices. Hence, local authorities were selected for this study's sample if they had experienced a positive

change in performance between the two inspections (for example, from inadequate to adequate, or adequate to good). Local authorities were also included if they had achieved a good or outstanding score in their safeguarding and LAC inspection because this would indicate they had sustained effective practices in safeguarding despite recent local and national pressures such as funding cuts and high-profile child protection cases.

Directors of Children's Services for each local authority in the sample were contacted by email, given details about the study and invited to register their interest in participating. Details of the five local authorities selected for the study, along with their safeguarding inspection and APA ratings, are listed in Table 1.

Directors of Children's Services in each case-study local authority were asked to identify relevant personnel that the research team could contact. The study involved telephone interviews with a small number of senior officers at tiers 1–3 in each local authority. Interviews were carried out between February and May 2011, and interviewees were asked to provide feedback on what they perceive to be key developments in safeguarding practices in their local authority in the last two years. This report sets out the findings from the interviews and includes:

- a thematic overview of safeguarding developments (Chapter 3)

Table 1 Details of case-study local authorities and inspection grades

	Type of authority	APA (2008) *Staying safe grade*	Safeguarding and LAC Inspection (2009/10) *Overall effectiveness grade*
Authority A	County	Inadequate	Adequate
Authority B	Unitary	Inadequate	Adequate
Authority C	Unitary	Good	Good
Authority D	London borough	Outstanding	Good
Authority E	County	Outstanding	Outstanding

- details of enablers and barriers to developing safeguarding practice (Chapter 4)

- summary and concluding comments (Chapter 5).

Further details of safeguarding practices in each of the five local authorities are provided in case studies presented in the Appendix.

3 Priority areas and key developments in safeguarding practice

This chapter provides a thematic overview of recent practice-based developments in safeguarding across the five case-study local authorities. The local authorities selected ranged from 'adequate' to 'outstanding' in their recent safeguarding and LAC inspection ratings and, therefore, offer a range of perspectives and approaches depending on local circumstances and priorities.

This study set out to identify what senior officer interviewees believe were the key developments in safeguarding in their authorities over the last two years. Therefore, this chapter is an overview of the most significant developments, as perceived by interviewees, rather than a detailed account of all developments in safeguarding undertaken by the five case-study local authorities over this time.

Across the five case studies, the main priority areas for improving safeguarding, identified by the interviewees, include:

- leadership and management (section 3.1)

- recruiting, maintaining and retaining a highly competent workforce (section 3.2)

- quality assurance and performance management (section 3.3)

- partnership working (section 3.4)

- referral and assessment processes and procedures. (section 3.5)

For each of these priority areas, the related findings and recommendations of the Laming and Munro reviews of safeguarding and child protection are presented for contextual background. This is followed by details of how safeguarding practices have been improved in these priority areas. The examples in the boxes are localised accounts of practice implementation in specific local authorities and, where possible, evidence of outcomes. Further details of the

approaches and developments undertaken by each local authority are also provided in the Appendix.

3.1 Leadership and management

3.1.1 Review findings and recommendations

Laming review

Strong and effective leadership is required to effect a step change in safeguarding services and to transform outcomes for children and young people. Laming noted the critical role of leaders in creating a supportive environment reinforced by a system of good line management that is creative, empowering and sensitive to the individual needs of frontline staff, yet confident enough to set and secure high standards of delivery. The review recommended that all Directors of Children's Services who do not have direct experience or background in safeguarding and child protection must appoint a senior manager within their team with the necessary skills and experience (Laming, 2009).

Munro review

Reform of the child protection system is heavily dependent on strong, skilled leadership at a local level and developing leaders is critical to success. Munro recommended that leaders should know their organisations well and constantly identify what needs to be realigned in order to improve performance and manage change. Leadership behaviour should be valued and encouraged at all levels of an organisation. Moreover, at the front line, personal qualities of leadership are needed when working with children and families in a more professional, less rule-bound way (Munro, 2011).

3.1.2 Case-study evidence: practice developments in leadership

Interviewees across the case-study areas recognised the importance of effective leadership and its critical role in improving safeguarding across a local authority. The impact of leadership can be seen to permeate other priority areas and is referenced throughout. The interviewees also highlighted the characteristics and approaches of effective leaders that have enabled change in recent safeguarding developments. Details of these are set out in Chapter 3.

Work to improve safeguarding practices by developing leadership and management was achieved in various ways across the five case-study local authorities.

- Managers were encouraged strategically and/or politically to take a holistic approach to safeguarding that promotes the inter-dependency of all areas of safeguarding practices.

- Effective managers were appointed (and/or training and support given to existing managers) to ensure a strategic response to safeguarding priorities and a proactive approach to facilitating change and improvement.

- Outward-facing management styles were developed with approaches and activities that encourage, engage and motivate the workforce.

- Services were restructured to ensure greater management oversight and presence within teams. Consequently, managers are able to build and maintain closer working relationships with frontline staff and develop management-level engagement with evolving operational-level issues.

- Systems were implemented to promote and encourage two-way communication between strategic and operational staff. In this way, all staff are included in and consulted on service and practice developments.

- Managers established new structures, systems and procedures to ensure team members' roles and responsibilities are clear with lines of accountability in place (see also Section 3.3 on quality assurance and performance management developments).

- No-blame cultures were fostered so that social workers are able to share their concerns with managers and learn from the collective experience of individuals and teams within the service.

Boxes 1-4 give examples illustrating the changes made in the case-study local authorities to enhance the management of safeguarding teams.

Box 1 Enhancing lines of communication to improve information exchange between operational and strategic level staff (Authority A)

A change in the senior leadership in this local authority was said by an interviewee to have resulted in developments in working practices. The Assistant Director now meets with the senior management team (SMT) each month and, in this way, receives regular feedback, is kept up to date and has a greater knowledge of pressures on the services. There is clear communication between staff and senior management, and staff are given more information about, for example, budgets than was previously the case. The SMT encourages feedback from frontline staff and monthly operational management meetings are now held where staff are encouraged to share any concerns.

Box 2 Providing structures to allow regular communication and dialogue between staff and senior managers (Authority E)

A social work forum was introduced in this local authority to bring together all elements of children's social care. Forums are held every two to three months and are chaired by a team manager and a principal practitioner. Each children's social care team has a representative at the forum and feeds back the forum's outcomes at team meetings. The minutes of the forum are published and accessible to all staff. The Assistant Director of Children's Services demonstrates commitment to the forum and its objectives by attending regularly. The forum allows staff to bring their concerns to the attention of senior managers. It is said to 'improve and facilitate' communication between the SMT and social workers over and above normal communication channels.

Box 3 Restructuring of social care teams to increase management oversight (Authority D)

> Services have been restructured in this local authority and small social work teams have been established with a ratio of managers to social workers that provides staff with a high level of management oversight. As well as providing clear leadership, managers take a can-do and we're all in this together approach. There is a high level of accountability and a no-blame culture. Social workers feel able to approach managers with their concerns and know they will be listened to. Managers are hands on and support their staff. For example, the Head of the Referral and Assessment team spends time working on the duty desk alongside other staff. As a result, the head is aware of each member of staff's strengths and the skills they need to develop.

Box 4 Developing of outward-facing approaches and activities to encourage, engage and motivate the workforce (Authority E)

> Safeguarding assurance days have been introduced in this local authority on a bi-monthly basis. On these days, the Director of Children's Services, the lead portfolio holder and the Assistant Director observe frontline teams from across the local authority. They talk to staff, accompany them on home visits, and attend case conferences, reviews and core meetings. Senior managers receive a good understanding of social workers' concerns and what is happening on the front line. Senior leaders have become more visible to both social workers and service users.

3.2 Recruiting, retaining and maintaining a highly competent workforce

3.2.1 Review findings and recommendations

Laming review

Improving safeguarding practices requires a stable and capable workforce. However, there are recruitment and retention difficulties among social workers. The report also identified poor supervision, high caseloads, and under-resourcing as contributing to low staff morale. Laming emphasised the importance of staff being trained and supported so that they are appropriately attuned to the needs of a child (Laming, 2009).

Munro review

The expertise and status of the social work profession has to be improved with continual professional development focusing on the skills required in child protection. Experienced social workers should be kept on the front line even when they become managers so that their experience and skills are not lost (Munro, 2011).

3.2.2 Case-study evidence: practice developments in workforce recruitment and retention

Interviews with strategic staff across the five case-study local authorities provided evidence of how recent workforce developments have brought about improvements in safeguarding practice. There was a unanimous agreement regarding the importance of having a stable and competent workforce in order to maximise skills and improve safeguarding. Specific actions were taken in the case-study local authorities to create such a workforce.

- Rigorous recruitment strategies were implemented which ensure that the staff appointed have the necessary experience and appropriate skills for the role.

- Time and money were invested in training and developing social workers.

- Effective line management and support have ensured social workers have the appropriate skills and competences.

- Individual and group supervision has been improved so that staff are encouraged to reflect on their safeguarding practices.

- Career pathways and progression routes for staff within a local authority have been established.

- Opportunities have been created for social workers to be listened to by senior management on matters such as the development of services and new ways of working.

Boxes 5–11 illustrate the steps taken by the case-study local authorities to improve the recruitment and retention of social workers and their working practices.

Box 5 Developing of an enhanced recruitment strategy (Authority B)

With the aim of achieving a more stable workforce, this local authority recently revised its recruitment and retention strategy. It now includes the recruitment of staff from overseas; contracts with preferred providers of agency staff; local advertising polices for new social work staff; actively pursuing individual professionals for specific jobs; and procedures to assess the attitude, knowledge and skills potential of staff prior to their employment. In order to help retain staff, the strategy also includes clear and transparent details of promotion and progression opportunities. The recruitment and retention strategy is believed to have been key in helping this local authority to recruit to posts previously difficult to fill. Recruitment and retention is now an area of strength highlighted in recent inspections.

Box 6 Restructuring social care teams to enhance working culture and environment (Authority A)

In 2010, this local authority decided to restructure social care into four areas with discrete service teams. At the same time, the SMT was also reviewed and restructured. Staff were consulted as part of the restructuring process and contributed to selecting the preferred model for the teams. A new Assistant Director of Children's Services and four heads of service were appointed. Existing staff applied for the posts available and were appointed to the four teams. This process meant that the local authority was able to recruit and select staff with the appropriate experience and abilities for specific roles. Flexibility has been built into the teams and how they operate. For example, staff are able to

work across teams when there are staffing shortages. This has helped to establish a supportive working culture that is helping to retain staff.

Box 7 Developing career pathways to retain experienced social workers (Authority D)

In this local authority, a new career pathway has been established for social workers. It provides staff with an incentive to stay at the local authority and builds capacity within services. As part of the new career pathway, a number of agency staff have been given permanent positions and, consequently, staff turnover has reduced. Learning opportunities have also been developed for social workers with career aspirations but who need support to progress into management level roles.

Box 8 Establishing senior practitioner roles to retain experienced personnel in frontline services (Authority E)

An advanced practitioner role within the social care teams has been introduced in this local authority. This enables experienced social workers to develop their career in social work practice and continue to work on the front line, rather than having to move into a management role. These senior practitioners have a smaller caseload of the most complex cases and have the necessary skills to help develop safeguarding expertise among less-experienced frontline staff.

Box 9 Developing reflective practice to maintain and enhance the skills and expertise of practitioners (Authority D)

Group sessions on reflective practice, originally set up for new staff, were so successful they have been extended to all staff in this local authority. Once a month a two-hour session is held and managers are committed to protecting this time for staff. The staff set the agenda and bring practice issues and live cases for discussion. Staff have an opportunity to voice any issues, and heads of service have an opportunity to meet

with staff on a regular basis. Staff particularly welcome the opportunity to learn from each other and from any outside speakers that attend. They were reported to enjoy the sessions because, as one interviewee said, 'they go back to what social work is all about'. As a result of these sessions, more staff know about individual cases and they are able to support each other, learn from each other and share good practice.

Box 10 Identifying the training needs of social workers to support continued effective practice (Authority B)

In this local authority, the focus is on training and development so that social workers acquire new skills and competencies to ensure continued improvement in the way that safeguarding is delivered. A robust training plan, using information from skills audits, was developed and a comprehensive training programme has been put in place. This has been implemented at a whole-service level in order to ensure training opportunities are available to all staff. Training at operational level focuses on a variety of areas including neglect, legal frameworks, core assessments and case report writing. For senior level managers, there is training on supervision skills, appraisal and performance management, and coaching/mentoring.

Box 11 Enhancing training opportunities to improve the development of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) (Authority E)

Recent developments in this local authority have led to the formal identification of training needs for NQSWs and a specific programme has been developed. This programme includes extra supervision, support with court cases and with case conferences, as well as NQSW support groups. A protected caseload has been introduced so there is a limit to the number, type and level of cases NQSWs hold. NQSWs are introduced to child protection cases gradually, through consultation and co-working. In addition, some of the responsibilities of principal practitioners have been removed so they are able to give more support to NQSWs.

3.3 Quality assurance and performance management

3.3.1 Review findings and recommendations

Laming review

Local authorities' performance management is central to leadership and accountability. Laming said that it is important to 'continue to find ways of understanding the impact of work to keep children safe from harm' (pp.15–16). The review stated that collaboration is needed among central government departments to develop systems for managing performance that drives improvement in the quality of services designed to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (Laming, 2009).

Munro review

Critical appraisal of how children and their families have been assessed and services planned is central to good practice and reducing errors. Munro said:

Ideally, this should be part of the working culture and not seen as a personal criticism, rather an outside perspective helping to pick up the unseen spots or offering a new angle on the problem.

Munro (2011, p.91)

Critical appraisals could be part of a social worker's routine supervision. They could also be a way for colleagues and fellow professionals to feed back to each other.

3.3.2 Case-study evidence: practice developments in quality assurance and performance management

Interviewees placed great importance on improving quality assurance (QA) and performance management processes. They gave examples of how QA and performance management procedures have been improved in their local authorities.

- Existing QA strategies and procedures have been developed and realigned to reflect and be responsive to current changes in safeguarding priorities.

- QA teams have been established to ensure effective and appropriate structures are in place to maintain safeguarding standards.

- The profile and role of QA amongst the workforce have been raised with the clear expectations of staff defined. QA and performance management have been embedded in all aspects of everyday practice.

- Case auditing has been improved so that outcomes readily identify, at an early stage, any skills gaps and training needs.

- Information derived from an enhanced approach to case auditing is fed into staff training and development, and is improving safeguarding practices among the wider workforce.

- There are more opportunities for staff to be exposed to examples of good safeguarding practice.

- Safeguarding service performance is receiving increased strategic scrutiny through the assessment of QA and performance management data.

- Performance management data is identifying areas for improvement, and allowing for better forward planning and the targeting of resources.

Boxes 12–15 give examples of the measures taken to improve quality assurance and performance management.

Box 12 Establishing of a dedicated QA team to ensure safeguarding standards (Authority A)

This local authority has established a dedicated QA team and developed a suite of practice standards for social care staff along with a set of indicators to demonstrate when the standards have been achieved. The QA team works closely with the performance management team and this has helped to develop a working culture in which QA and performance management have a higher profile and priority among the workforce.

Box 13 Creating a new strategy to ensure distributed responsibility for QA (Authority B)

A new QA strategy was developed that specifies procedures to ensure that all staff, from the Director of Children's Services to social workers, assess the quality of work on an ongoing basis. The QA team undertakes a number of themed audits while the Head of Social Care and Safeguarding also conducts one-off audits, such as overseeing a selection of supervision records. Team managers also conduct one audit for each social worker every month. Through the auditing process, gaps in staff skills and competencies are identified and are used to inform training needs.

Box 14 Embedding performance management to improve practice (Authority E)

Daily reports are sent to managers regarding the number of children subject to child protection plans and the numbers of LAC. Weekly reports on data and performance are sent to the senior management team. A monthly bulleted report is produced and the executive departmental management team (with the lead portfolio holder) and the departmental management team address issues within it. The Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee also receives regular updates of management information from which it extrapolate areas for development, as do the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) and the LSCB. One interviewee described frontline managers as now having performance information 'at the tips of their fingers'. The data captured within performance reports facilitates the management of care planning and the allocation of work. Line managers can readily identify hotspots and difficult areas and put strategies in place to address them.

Box 15 Analysing of performance management information to improve services (Authority A)

Time and resources have been invested to improve the analysis of performance management information so that senior managers can identify pressures on both teams and individual staff members. Previously, performance management information was limited and restricted to individual teams. The performance management team now reports each month on all key indicators, such as how long children have had a child protection plan, by area and team. Area managers meet once a month to analyse performance management data. They are able to identify themes and capacity issues using the data provided. Having effective performance management information also enables the SMT to identify trends and forward plan through, for example, recruitment planning and targeting specific areas.

3.4 Partnership working

3.4.1 Review findings and recommendations

Laming review

Most frontline services are committed to the principle of interagency working and staff recognise the need to pool information, expertise and resources in order to effectively safeguard children. However, Laming also stated that:

It is evident that the challenges of working across organisational boundaries continue to pose barriers in practice, and that cooperative efforts are often the first to suffer when services and individuals are under pressure.

Laming (2009, p.36)

The Laming review also placed an emphasis on fostering effective relationships with children and their families.

Munro review

Local authorities and their partners should start an ongoing process to review and redesign the ways in which child and family social work is delivered. Munro suggested that given the current wave of radical reform of public services, it is important that the formal mechanisms for working together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and the lines of accountability within and between different organisations, are as clear and unambiguous as possible (Munro, 2011).

3.4.2 Case-study evidence: practice developments in partnership working

There is evidence from the interviews that demonstrates how successful interagency working has been achieved. Interviewees said they have developed systemic partnership working by:

- developing leadership of strategic partnerships bring together all relevant local agencies and budget holders to meet safeguarding responsibilities

- encouraging interagency communication at all levels

- creating multi-agency teams and co-locating staff

- facilitating flexible working arrangements to allow staff from different agencies to contribute to each other's working practices

- developing approaches to working with families, focusing on their role as partners rather than service users and involving them in service and programme developments.

Boxes 16–20 give examples of how the local authorities have developed their strategic partnerships.

Box 16 Reorganising services to increase interagency working between children's social care and adult social care (Authority D)

A recent reorganisation has brought children's social care and adult social care into the same directorate. There are weekly meetings between children's and adult social care and there is improved joint working relating to specific families. There is a greater level of strategic integration focusing on whole-family intervention and support especially in cases where, for example, parents have mental health issues, and families are involved in court proceedings and/or have housing issues. As a consequence of these changes, the needs of children are being safeguarded, while supporting the needs of the the wider family.

Box 17 Developing approaches to working with families to support complex needs (Authority C)

A new programme to improve outcomes for families with complex needs has been developed. The programme is based on co-production (that is, delivering services with, rather than for, service users). The local authority worked with a partner organisation to develop the new approach and spent three months working with 12 local families and a range of staff to identify barriers to services. Families were involved in all aspects of the programme's development including its methodology, recording systems and evaluation procedures. The programme's philosophy is based on enabling families to lead their own change process. A multi-agency team delivers the programme with staff seconded from a number of organisations including health, the police and housing. Staff support families to discover their aspirations and to build their own development plans.

Box 18 Developing partnerships with the police to improve systems and outcomes (Authority D)

Partnership working between children's services and the police has been enhanced through the establishment of joint meetings and the part-time location of a social work manager in the police's public protection unit. In addition to strengthening partnership working, this member of staff has contributed to increasing the appropriateness of referrals made by the police to children's social care. A further outcome has been the implementation of a new triage system for young offenders. In this system, young people identified by the police as engaging in low-level offences are offered the opportunity to engage in interventions provided through children's services as an alternative to potential prosecution.

Box 19 Developing Partnership working with schools to increase awareness of safeguarding responsibilities (Authority D)

Recent development work focused on building good relationships with schools in order to enhance safeguarding practice and processes. Lead managers from children's services work with a number of schools and have regular meetings with staff. This has engendered trust and facilitated effective joint working. Through this approach, schools have become more aware of their role and responsibilities relating to safeguarding children.

Box 20 Developing Partnership work to address issues relating to child trafficking (Authority D)

This local authority is close to an international airport and has introduced procedures to address issues relating to child trafficking and missing children. This includes improving airport officials' understanding of safeguarding issues and their related responsibilities. A child trafficking and exploitation sub-group has been established by the LSCB, which involves key agencies in the

area, immigration, the UK Border Agency and national organisations (including the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Agency). These procedures have encouraged the agencies to take joint responsibility for trafficked and missing children. Fortnightly multi-agency operational meetings are attended by social workers from the asylum seekers intake team and from the referral and assessment team, immigration officers from the airport, staff from the police's child investigation team, and the airport intelligence unit. Children that came through the airport in the previous two weeks are discussed at these meetings and potential safeguarding issues are identified.

3.5 Referral and assessment processes and procedures

3.5.1 Review findings and recommendations

Laming review

Lord Laming recommended that senior service managers, including Directors of Children's Services, Chief Executives of Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and police Area Commanders, 'regularly review all points of referral where concerns about a child's safety are received to ensure they are sound in terms of the quality of risk assessments, decision making, onward referrals and multi-agency working' (Laming 2009, p.84).

Munro review

It is crucial that those supporting children and families feel confident about when to refer to child protection in order to reduce the numbers of children who are referred to children's social care, but are not deemed to warrant a child protection response. This is likely to lead to better identification of those children and young people who are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm because there is less resource expended on prioritising large numbers of referrals and more time spent with children and families (Munro, 2011).

3.5.2 Case-study evidence: practice developments in referral and assessment

There is evidence that improved efficiencies in referral and assessment processes have enhanced safeguarding practice. The case-study local authorities have achieved this by:

- ensuring that referral thresholds are applied with consistency and other agencies are aware of and understand referral criteria

- streamlining the assessment process so there is only one point of referral

- ensuring the appropriate delegation of referrals and initial assessments to experienced staff

- providing additional support and guidance to staff undertaking initial assessments.

Boxes 21–24 give examples of how the case-study local authorities have improved their referral and assessment processes.

Box 21 Co-locating of staff to enhance the referral process (Authority C)

In order to achieve, as an interviewee from this local authority said, a 'common front door for children requiring specialist services', the common assessment framework (CAF) coordinator is now located within the referral and assessment team. This facilitates a joined-up approach between integrated locality teams and children's social care. Learning is further enhanced through a scheme enabling other professionals to spend two days per week in the referral and assessment team. This supports professional development at an operational level and facilitates shared understanding of the referral processes between partner agencies. Senior local authority staff reported that this has resulted in a seamless service where children 'do not fall through the net' and 'are not passed from one system to another'.

Box 22 Enhancing processes to ensure the appropriate referral of cases (Authority A)

Referral criteria have been revised in conjunction with partner agencies, and existing cases reviewed against the new criteria. Where cases did not meet the threshold, partner agency involvement was encouraged. Other agencies have been made aware of the new referral criteria by social care staff through their day-to-day contacts. Social care staff also provide advice to other agencies on ways to take a case forward. In addition, the CAF coordinator works with schools and other agencies to advise them on how to refer to the appropriate services. The staff supervision policy and procedures have been revised and a supervision clinic established for the assessment team to provide staff with a greater level of support and direction at the early stages of a case.

Box 23 Developing Systems to improve the quality of referral information to enhance the referral process (Authority E)

Referrals are initially managed in the customer service centre, where information and advice is given to children and families. The customer service team screens all contacts and signposts families to the services that best meet their needs. The customer service centre acquires good-quality information from their initial contact to ensure that all referrals to social care assessment teams are appropriate. Decisions to undertake initial assessments are actioned within 24 hours of the referral. The majority of social care referrals lead to an initial assessment and almost 90 per cent of assessments are undertaken within a specified timescale. A high proportion of these initial assessments move into a core assessment.

Box 24 Enhancing procedures to ensure appropriate delegation of referrals and initial assessments (Authority D)

To prevent inappropriate referrals, a social care manager is assigned to the team around the child (TAC) panel where multi-disciplinary discussions about cases take place. New procedures have been put in place to ensure appropriate delegation of cases according to staff experience. Frontline staff in the initial assessment team, for example, no longer undertake Section 47 investigations (this is where children are considered to be at risk of significant harm). Where there is a likelihood of child protection issues, cases are passed to the child protection team, which has a greater number of experienced senior practitioners.

4 Associated supporting factors and barriers in safeguarding developments

This chapter explores the supporting factors that have helped to facilitate changes in safeguarding practices across the five case-study local authorities. It also highlights some of the barriers and challenges in the development of safeguarding work, as identified by interviewees.

4.1 Supporting factors in safeguarding developments

A number of conditions and factors have influenced improvements in safeguarding:

- the commitment of local authority leaders

- strategic and operational managers' facilitating approach

- existing structures underpinning partnership working

- workforce attitudes and characteristics

- specific local authority contexts and circumstances.

4.1.1 The commitment of local authority leaders

Developments in safeguarding practice require local authority-wide support and commitment from senior personnel. Commitment is needed from lead members and chief executives. Key figures in local administrations were said to have added weight to and enabled developments in safeguarding practices by, for example, providing strategic investment in financial and political resources. Furthermore, the personal attributes of high-profile personnel, including their charisma, vision and drive, were seen as instrumental in developing and embedding improvements in safeguarding.

4.1.2 The facilitating role and approach of strategic and operational managers

Interviewees said management-related developments have improved safeguarding. These developments were thought to have been underpinned by several key conditions. Crucially, effective management structures were characterised by the credibility of high-quality managers derived from their expert knowledge of and experience in safeguarding practice. Senior leaders with social work backgrounds, a 'passion for and commitment to social work', and a willingness to engage with the experience of social workers and team managers, were fundamental foundations upon which developments in management could be built. A significant enabling factor in two local authorities was reported to be the appointment of new senior management teams, characterised by an 'energy and enthusiasm' for service development and improvements, and the ability to provide clear direction for achieving this.

In several of the case-study local authorities, recent developments in management approaches and processes entailed providing increased support and encouragement to facilitate all personnel taking ownership of, and contributing creative ideas towards, improving safeguarding. These developments were said to have been underpinned by the active and supportive approach of senior management, led by trusted and respected heads of service who could drive improvement and engage all staff in the changes. Examples of this include the development of a performance management culture with a focus on driving improvement across the service. This type of approach was seen to be an essential precondition for the establishment and operation of the challenging yet no-blame working culture identified as being a crucial development in improving safeguarding in several local authorities.

4.1.3 Existing structures to facilitate partnership working

Partnership working in local authorities was often seen to be driven by a shared commitment to improving safeguarding. Positive developments in partnership working arose when investments capitalised on existing cultures and processes of joint working at political, strategic and operational levels. In such contexts, partnership structures and processes such as joint-working protocols, communication strategies, information-exchange agreements and co-location of staff, could then be successfully implemented to enable developments in safeguarding.

4.1.4 Attitudes and characteristics of the workforce

Improving safeguarding practice involves the creation of a stable workforce committed to children and young people. Essential components of this included the willingness of staff to scrutinise and develop their own safeguarding practice and to buy into the culture and ethos of the service.

The underlying factors in achieving this included having an appropriate and inclusive management structure; effective staff recruitment and retention strategies; providing appropriate performance management and training opportunities; and developing an empowering and transparent working culture.

4.1.5 Specific local authority contexts and circumstances

Developments in safeguarding are also supported by or driven as a response to contexts and circumstances specific to a local authority. For example, improvements in service delivery in one case-study local authority were, in part, implemented as a response to the recommendations of a joint area review (JAR) inspection. In another area, the high number of young people living in public care prompted developments in service practice to ensure the safeguarding needs of this group of young people are being addressed appropriately.

4.2 Barriers to safeguarding developments

Interviewees identified a small number of barriers and challenges to improving safeguarding. These centre on:

- process and systemic challenges

- challenges to partnership working

- external constraints.

4.2.1 Process and systemic challenges

Several administrative and bureaucratic challenges were identified by interviewees as impeding the implementation and operation of developments in safeguarding. The time commitments required by the Integrated Children's System (ICS), for example, are regarded as disproportionately diverting social workers away from frontline safeguarding activities. In one local authority, it was suggested that the strategic management and leadership of safeguarding could be challenged by the diversion of managers' time to oversee current redundancy and restructuring processes.

4.2.2 Challenges to partnership working

In two case-study local authorities, challenges associated with partnership working were identified. In one, this included insufficient capital funding to enable the full development of integrated locality teams, as such, these operated as virtual teams (between 2008 and 2011) until capital funding was secured to facilitate this. In another, it was suggested that relationships between schools and the local authority could potentially be challenged by the development of academies that could choose to 'shut the door' on local authority input. Interviewees were concerned that this could weaken existing safeguarding processes and structures.

4.2.3 Wider challenges

External constraints, such as the economic recession and associated reductions in local authority budgets, pose challenges to safeguarding developments, especially in terms of resource availability and staffing capacity. It was also suggested that difficulties had been encountered in relation to staff motivation and morale following a negative inspection and the disruption caused through redundancies.

5   Summary and concluding comments

In the five case-study local authorities, work to develop safeguarding is being implemented across a range of service areas and covering a wide spectrum of practice. The local authorities ranged from 'adequate' to 'outstanding' in their recent safeguarding and LAC inspections and offer different perspectives and approaches according to their local circumstances. Despite this, there were commonalities in terms of their key priorities for improving safeguarding. These include:

- enhancing the recruitment and retention of staff

- developing leadership and management

- improving QA and performance management processes

- changing referral and assessment procedures

- increasing partnership working.

Across these priority areas, the mechanisms for developing practices typically include work to:

- restructure services and teams

- enhance communication mechanisms between operational and strategic personnel

- increase training, supervision and support for social workers.

These developments were evident across each of the local authorities, and appear to be critical to achieving and embedding long-term changes in safeguarding.

Across the local authorities, the origins of approaches to improvements in safeguarding were difficult to identify. Many interviewees, for example, commented that while recent safeguarding developments were in line with those proposed by Laming and Munro, changes were often brought about as a result of ongoing efforts to achieve improvements determined by priorities at the local level and the need, in some instances, to respond to areas for improvement in the light of recent inspections. It was clear, however, that local authority leaders' commitment is key to driving forward the safeguarding agenda within a local area and many recent developments would not have been possible without active, supportive and committed senior managers.

Supporting the findings of Munro (2010), good and emerging practice is evident despite current difficult economic times and system-level challenges. This study has presented evidence that suggests safeguarding continues to be a high priority for local authorities and they have or are developing the necessary structures, systems and effective working cultures to support continued child protection reforms.

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Appendix: Case studies

Case study 1: **Authority A**

Case study 2: **Authority B**

Case study 3: **Authority C**

Case study 4: **Authority D**

Case study 5: **Authority E**

Case-study interviews were undertaken between February and May 2011. The following descriptions, therefore, may not reflect the most recent safeguarding work or priorities.

Case study 1: Authority A

In the latest Ofsted safeguarding and looked after children (LAC) inspection, undertaken in September 2010, the overall effectiveness of safeguarding services in this local authority was classified as 'adequate'. Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development were deemed 'good'. This is in contrast to the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) in 2008, where their performance in relation to the category of staying safe was assessed as 'inadequate'. Performance management was said to have played a key role in promoting service improvement over this time. This case study, undertaken in spring 2011, presents local authority staff accounts of improvements to safeguarding practice over the last few years and the key learning for other councils.

Key learning for other councils

Key messages relating to safeguarding practice in this local authority include the following:

- Use quality assurance (QA) and auditing to ensure the local authority is aware of existing safeguarding standards.

- Consult with staff and service users to ensure they are committed to any changes made.

- Be responsive to current policies, identify areas for improvement and be proactive in driving changes forward.

- Prioritise and value supervision, and ensure that staff know how important this is for workforce development.

- Ensure that referral thresholds are applied consistently and that other agencies are aware of, and understand the threshold criteria.

- Take a wider perspective on improving safeguarding practice, including how one area of development may feed into another.

Background

According to the safeguarding inspection in September 2010, this local authority had a resident population of approximately 241,985 children and young people aged 0–17. In January 2010, 18.2 per cent of the school population was classified as belonging to an ethnic group other than white British. Some 8.5 per cent speak English as an additional language (Ofsted inspection, September 2010).

The Children and Young People's Trust was set up in 2010 as part of a re-launch of local partnership arrangements for children. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) became independently chaired in 2009, but, in September 2010, the chair was vacant. The SCB brings together the main organisations working with children, young people and families which provide safeguarding services in the area.

In September 2010, social care services for children had 368 foster carers and commissioned some 1,200 services from over 2,000 suppliers. Community-based children's services are provided by four local area teams which each manage referrals and assessments, and provide a range of support services to children in need, children subject to child protection plans and LAC. According to the Ofsted inspection, in September 2010, there were 764 LAC and 659 children who were the subject of a child protection plan, which was a significant increase over the previous two years.

Improvements in safeguarding practice

Recent improvements and developments were identified in the areas of:

- restructuring of the social care teams

- the local safeguarding children board

- QA and audits

- supervision

- performance management information

- senior leadership.

The description in this section includes some reference to the softer impacts resulting from improvements in practice, whilst later sections focus on evidence and harder outcomes.

The Joint Area Review (JAR) in 2008 identified some areas of weakness and this prompted the Director of Children's Services (DCS) to set about making improvements. Safeguarding was one of the major areas for improvement. At the time, a new management team was put in place to oversee the changes.

The Laming review was said to have had a significant influence on the local authority's development of interagency working and the development of greater understanding and communication between agencies.

Restructuring of the social care teams

In 2010, social care was restructured into four areas with discrete service teams. At the same time the senior management team (SMT) was reviewed and restructured. This included a new Assistant Director (AD) and four new heads of service. Staff were consulted as part of the restructuring process and made a contribution to selecting the preferred model. Existing staff applied for the posts available and were appointed to the different teams. Staff were given a choice as to where they were placed, and most got their first or second choice. This process meant that the local authority was able to recruit and select people with the right experience and the right personality for specific jobs.

Clear guidance was provided about specific types of family need and which team they should be referred to. Teams are now more locality based and, as a result, work with partner agencies has

improved. According to staff, referral thresholds are explicit and well managed. Staff are clear about their roles and the remit of each team, and referrals are no longer passed from one team to another unnecessarily. Teams are more child-focused and they are able to provide a better service because they are more targeted. According to the manager of the assessment team, this team is now smaller, more manageable and more focused. There is closer working across teams and the culture is more supportive. This involves, for example, staff working across teams when there are staffing shortages. Flexibility is built in to the teams and how they operate; this creates camaraderie among the staff.

As part of the restructuring process, the referral criteria were revisited with partner agencies. Existing cases were reviewed against the new criteria. Where cases did not meet the threshold, partner agency involvement was encouraged. Other agencies were made aware of the new referral criteria by social care staff through their day-to-day contacts. Social care staff advise other agencies on ways to take a case forward. In addition, the CAF (common assessment framework) coordinator also goes out to schools and other agencies to advise them about referral to appropriate services. Review of the referral criteria has meant that social workers are now not as overwhelmed with cases. In the assessment team, for example, social workers do not hold more than 12 cases and there is an average case load of six or seven. According to staff, the quality of child-focused assessments has improved as a result. Children's needs are identified earlier and they are directed to the most appropriate service.

As part of the restructuring process, and as there had been an increase in the number of child protection plans, cases where children had been subject to a child protection plan for two or more years were reviewed. From a management perspective it was said to be important to look at cases which had been ongoing for at least 15 months, the point at which outcomes become less positive. A lot of cases had to be reviewed at the beginning of this process. According to one member of staff: 'It is about not being risk averse

– this can be frightening at first.' Regular performance management meetings with teams and with the SMT enables staff to be 'called to account' for cases that are ongoing for extended periods. Cases are also reviewed on a day-to-day basis through regular staff supervision (see section on supervision).

There is also a dedicated managing allegations team which is comprised of a manager and a senior social worker. Allegations were previously conducted on a rota basis and timescales were not being met. Since the restructuring, the Safeguarding Unit has also been streamlined and there was said to be greater management accountability. The chairs of case conferences and LAC reviews have also been linked to the four areas (although they are not located there). According to staff, this is more cost effective and has improved communication with area staff.

The LSCB

The local authority has streamlined the LSCB so it is more fit for purpose. There is a small executive group at senior level, an operational group, area groups and standing groups, which have also been reduced in size. An independent chair has been appointed. The remit of the LSCB has been changed so that it focuses on a few core tasks (for example, updating and communicating to all relevant staff the child protection procedures) to make this more manageable. A recent review also suggests that the LSCB should cease to deliver training and the commissioning of services so that they can concentrate on core tasks. The assistant team manager of the assessment team undertook a review of the way in which the LSCB operated. As a result, in order to improve this process, members of the social care teams have been made more accessible to other professionals who can ask for advice about cases. Consequently, according to staff, relationships with other agencies have improved and there is greater understanding of each other's priorities.

QA and audits

A dedicated QA team was established and the team developed a suite of practice standards for all of social care. The Head of Safeguarding, who had developed a similar exercise in her previous local authority, developed a set of indicators to demonstrate when the standards have been achieved: 'It's important to have a clear perspective of where you are.' The QA team worked closely with the performance management team and this has enabled them to develop a QA and performance culture within the local authority.

Every two months there is a 'deep-dive' themed audit in which elected members and senior staff from other agencies are involved. A deep-dive audit on the children in need process has just been completed and one on LAC is about to commence. Engaging the multi-agency network actively in the auditing process was said to be 'really powerful' in enhancing and improving safeguarding work. Areas of concern can then be re-audited and areas for improvement identified. The Munro review has identified deep-dive audits as a form of good safeguarding practice.

There has been a greater focus on QA and audit throughout the social care service. Social workers at all levels have a copy of the auditing tool and all teams work to the standards that are set. Each month, social workers and assistant team managers examine the cases of other teams and each other's work using the audit tool. This helps social workers to develop their own practice. The feedback received by staff gives them the opportunity to review their case work and some of the decisions they have made. According to the assistant team manager: 'It is imperative that social workers are included within the audit.' The auditing process encourages staff to develop their practice. This, in turn, influences staff retention and is linked to QA, supervision and accountability.

Supervision

Staff supervision policy and procedures have been redesigned so that there is an increased focus on supervision and all staff understand what is expected of them. If a member of staff does not receive regular supervision, they can request it. According to staff, this has made 'a huge difference and staff have been empowered'. Supervision training, which was practice based, was provided by an outside organisation. According to the team manager, who supervises two assistant team managers on a monthly basis, this has helped towards a better understanding of social work and safeguarding practice from a practitioner's perspective. In addition, new forms were introduced to document the outcomes of supervision. These forms allow staff to document how cases have progressed and encourage staff to reflect critically on their practice, and to analyse risk.

A supervision clinic was established for the assessment team because it was thought that cases require more senior oversight at the outset. These clinics are additional to normal supervision. There was an acknowledgement that managers needed to set aside more time for supervision.

Supervision, along with the QA, has enhanced social workers' personal development. Social workers now have to undergo an appraisal and have ongoing personal development aims: 'This feeds into supervision beautifully' (assistant team manager). Team managers are able to review staff's work and identify areas for individual personal development.

Performance management information

More time and money has been invested in performance management information so managers can immediately see clearly where the pressures are for teams and for individual staff, and if a child's needs are not being met. In contrast, previously, performance management information was limited and restricted to individual teams. The performance management team reports each

month on all the key indicators (for example, how long children have been on a child protection plan) by area and by team. Area managers meet once a month to look at the performance management data. They are able to identify themes and capacity issues using the data provided. They are therefore able to share problems and identify things which are working well. Having effective performance management information also enables the SMT to evaluate the information, identify trends and address gaps in services. They have looked, for example, at the re-referral rate and compared this with the re-referral rate of their statistical neighbours. They are able to look at caseloads across the service and to forward plan (for example,through recruitment planning and targeting specific areas). For example, with 30 per cent of referrals originating from domestic abuse, the local authority has set up a domestic violence project, a perpetrator scheme and support groups for women and children involved in domestic abuse. In addition, individual teams have a sense of achievement as they can see from the data that children's needs are being assessed in a timely manner.

Senior leadership

The change in senior leadership has resulted in a change in culture within the local authority. The AD meets with service managers each month and, in this way, the SMT receives regular feedback, is up to date and knows about the pressures on services. Where processes are not working effectively, the SMT looks at how they can be done differently. The SMT is open and honest and encourages feedback from staff on the front line. There is clear communication between staff and senior management and staff are given more information (for example, about budgets) than they were previously. There are monthly operational management meetings. As a result, according to interviewees, there is a can-do approach amongst staff, they are honest and share their concerns, and staff on the front line have a sense of ownership of the service. In contrast, previously, according to one interviewee, there had been a clear divide between practitioners, managers and senior

managers, and a lack of communication and understanding between the different levels.

Enablers

The following were said to enable the developments and improvements discussed above:

- senior leaders with a social work background and therefore a passion and commitment for social work

- the vision and charisma of the AD, who was said to be a key factor in driving the changes forward

- a newly appointed SMT with an energy and enthusiasm for service development and improvement

- a clear direction and strong management to drive forward service development from the outset

- a stable workforce who are committed to children and young people

- effective communication between senior managers, operational managers and frontline staff

- greater service ownership by staff, a willingness to share their concerns and a commitment to improve and develop their own practice

- whole-service changes which link together and reinforce each other.

Barriers

The following were said to be barriers or challenges to the implementation and development of the improvements discussed above:

- the time involved in HR processes in terms of both recruitment and redundancies

- recovering from a negative inspection because it can be difficult to re-motivate people when they feel they have been criticised

- the initial reviewing of cases, which involves assessing risk and trusting other agencies to safeguard children.

Evidence of outcomes and savings

In addition to the softer impacts discussed above, there was evidence of improved outcomes and savings as a result of improvements to safeguarding practice.

The QA audit reports show positive outcomes, as audits are said to be improving. There is anecdotal evidence of social workers auditing their own work against the standards which have been set.

According to staff, assessments are now conducted within the required timescales and needs are assessed more quickly. The recent unannounced inspection highlighted that the quality of assessments has improved and that the individual wishes of children are taken into account. There were no priority areas for action from the recent inspection. According to staff, there is a vast difference in initial assessments compared to two years ago and a huge improvement in supervision files and in how cases are managed.

Staff morale was said to have improved: 'If staff feel management are on board and the risk is managed, this frees them up to be able to do more.' There was a view that social workers feel more positive because they are able to use their ideas and expertise in developing and owning cases.

Restructuring has also provided an opportunity for cost savings as some roles were merged, as well as there being fewer positions. Linking case conference chairs to the four areas has made the work more cost effective because there is less travelling involved. Money is now said to be targeted at the areas of greatest need, as indicated by the case of domestic violence discussed earlier.

What could have been done better?

According to the Head of Safeguarding: 'You are never starting with a clean sheet of paper and you have to adapt accordingly.' For example, they would prefer not to have dual contracts for the chairs of LAC reviews and the chairs of case conferences, but changing this would be expensive.

One suggestion was that the measures outlined above should have been put in place sooner: 'The longer you leave it the harder it is to change.'

Next steps

A number of future plans were identified. The local authority was said to be examining:

- the co-location of more staff with partner agencies, including, for example, locating a senior social worker on the police central reference desk to assist with domestic abuse

- establishment of an extended hours service for 11–18 year olds

- more effective ways of working with domestic abuse rather than putting children on a child protection plan

- the training and development of social workers, and developing the workforce to support cases of domestic violence

- the reasons for re-referral and getting feedback from service users through a feedback form distributed by team members

- allocation of time to consolidate the work they have done and for social workers to share experiences so they are working more coherently as a county

- measures further to improve interagency relations.

Case study 2: Authority B

In Ofsted's most recent safeguarding and LAC inspection in July 2010, safeguarding services in this local authority were classified as 'adequate', and some elements as 'good'. In contrast, in the APA in 2008, safeguarding services (within the category of staying safe) were classified as 'inadequate'. This case study, undertaken in spring 2011, presents local authority staff accounts of improvements to safeguarding practice over the last few years and the key learning for other councils.

Key learning for other councils

Key messages relating to safeguarding practice in this local authority include:

- Ensure effective leadership and management in order to drive change and improve practice.

- Invest in staff on all levels, including the development of formal communication systems.

- Recognise the importance of having a stable workforce in order to maximise their skills and bring about improvements in practice.

- Have a recruitment and retention strategy which ensures the best people for the role.

- Through training and development ensure that the workforce have the skills and competencies to do their job.

- Establish a structure, systems and procedures which ensure that there is clarity of role and that lines of accountability are clear.

- Ensure clarity with regard to the expectations of staff and ensure that staff are exposed to examples of good practice.

Background

According to the Ofsted inspection in July 2010, this local authority had a resident population of approximately 40,500 children and young people aged 0–19. In 2010, 20 per cent of the school population was classified as belonging to an ethnic group other than white British and 10 per cent of pupils as speaking English as an additional language.

The Children and Young People Trust was set up in 2003. It includes a wide range of appropriate partners and agencies. The LSCB has been independently chaired since 2007. This brings together the main organisations working with children, young people and families in the area that provide safeguarding services. At the time of the Ofsted inspection in July 2010, there were 35 in-house foster carers and 37 placements were commissioned in the independent sector. Community-based children's services are provided by a referral and assessment team and three area teams, supported by borough-wide teams for children in need, children with a disability, adoption and fostering, as well as teams for LAC and young people leaving care.

According to the Ofsted inspection, in July 2010, there were 81 LAC and 21 young people with care leaver status. At this time there were also 46 LAC who were the subject of a child protection plan (a decrease over the previous two years).

Improvements in safeguarding practice

Recent improvements and developments were identified in the areas of:

- QA

- restructuring of teams

- recruitment and retention of social workers

- training and development.

The description in this section includes some reference to the softer impacts resulting from improvements in practice, whilst later sections focus on evidence and harder outcomes.

Having set out what was expected of social workers, the Laming report was said to have influenced standard setting and expectations. The Laming review was considered to have informed many of the developments highlighted, including new systems, such as the electronic recording system.

Quality assurance

A new QA strategy was developed, using a model focused on accountability and role modelling, to ensure that tasks were carried out to a high standard. The new strategy specifies that all staff, from the DCS to the social workers on the front line, assess the quality of work on an ongoing basis.

This local authority also introduced the new role of Safeguarding and QA Service Manager. This individual, along with the QA team, undertakes a number of themed audits. Audits have included, for example, one with a family support focus, where the standard of family support plans across the service were assessed. A thematic approach to the QA of child protection plans was also conducted in which the pattern of care that led to a child protection plan was examined. In addition, the Head of Social Care and Safeguarding also undertakes one-off audits, such as overseeing a selection of the supervision records. Case work audits are conducted by service managers. Team managers undertake one audit per worker, per month, and the learning points from these audits are bought to the attention of the team at meetings.

The information gleaned from the audits undertaken has been used to inform the improvement journey. In this way, staff feel that management oversight has improved 'massively'

and clear expectations and standards are now in place. A private company which focuses on providing policies, procedures and associated solutions in the children's and adults' sector, was commissioned by this local authority to publish and maintain social care policies and procedures. This takes some of the pressure away from social care managers as the system is held by an independent company. The introduction of an electronic recording system was said to have enhanced compliance with safeguarding procedures and helped maintain standards.

Monthly supervision now takes place and teams will be given additional time for case discussions and reflective practice workshops. Local examples of good practice (for example, reports, plans etc.) are now available to all staff. It was thought to be important to expose staff to examples of good practice, particularly with a relatively new staff group.

Through the auditing process, deficits in staff skills and competencies were also identified. This highlighted the need to maximise and support the ongoing learning of experienced, as well as new staff.

Restructuring of teams

The local authority took a phased approach to introducing a new social care team structure. The first step was to have a single point of contact and clear protocols for referrals. A central borough-wide referral and assessment team was therefore established.

The social work team is now organised into a traditional structure with service managers, team managers and social workers so that there were clear lines of accountability. There was a formal consultation process with staff through HR throughout the restructure and there was some consultation with outside agencies. Staffing structure charts have now been developed so that the new teams know who they are accountable to. In addition, within the social care team, leads for developmental areas (for example, Child and Adult

Mental Health Service [CAMHS]) have been established.

Recruitment and retention of social workers

The local authority recognised the need for a more stable workforce and the appointment of managers with experience in all aspects of social care. A number of new elements to the recruitment and retention strategy were implemented, including:

- recruitment from overseas

- contracts with preferred providers to permanently recruit

- local advertising for new social work staff

- supporting the development of 'home grown' social workers

- succession planning.

Recruitment and retention was viewed as a corporate exercise. Using the recruitment and retention strategy staff have been successfully recruited to posts previously difficult to fill. Recruitment and retention is now an area of strength, as highlighted in more recent Ofsted inspections. The service now has 80 per cent permanent staff, whereas before there was 80 per cent agency staff.

There was a strategic decision to focus on the recruitment of social work practitioners in the first instance and to retain locum managers. Agency staff were re-employed on a permanent basis to provide stability within the management group. Informed by case file audit and training needs analysis (see QA strategy section), the strategic decision was made not to employ newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) for a period of time. There was a key focus on effective staff management. Staff assessments and probation periods were reintroduced, and managers were supported to implement these effectively. A new appraisal

system was introduced where there was a focus on behaviour as well as on process targets. Expectations of staff were made more explicit and the new appraisal procedures allowed managers to have 'enabling conversations' with staff.

Training and development

Linked to recruitment and retention, focus has been placed on training and development so that social workers develop new skills and competencies and are better equipped to do their job. A robust training plan, using information from audits (see QA strategy section), was developed and a comprehensive training programme was put in place. Training at an operational level focuses on a variety of basic areas, such as neglect, the legal framework, core assessments and report writing. There was also training on supervision skills, appraisal and performance management for managers, as well as coaching/mentoring from an independent company. Where existing staff within the local authority expressed a desire to become social workers they were able to access social work training. Staff were invited to participate in social work practice teaching courses and reflective practice sessions are being established. There was also a strategic commitment to support student placements to facilitate the development of a learning culture and to invest in, and become linked in to, research facilities to inform and develop practice.

Enablers

The following were said to enable the developments and improvements discussed above:

- a small local authority with a small number of senior managers overseeing casework

- financial and political support from lead members and the chief executive for the strategic investment of resources

- a new children's services leadership team which has 'a massive amount of energy'

- investment in the management group and particular teams by providing whole days for development and whole-service workshops

- a head of service who drives improvement

- a dynamic and robust framework taking a whole-system approach to improvement

- a supportive and empowering cultural context

- engaging all staff in developments

- leaders who engage with the experience of social workers and team managers.

Barriers

The following were said to be barriers or challenges to the implementation and development of the improvements discussed above:

- being deemed inadequate by Ofsted has an immediate negative impact on the existing workforce that needs to be managed through

- motivating staff at a time when there is a lot of staff upheaval (due to existing staff leaving and new staff being appointed).

Evidence of outcomes and savings

In addition to some of the softer impacts discussed above, there was evidence of improved outcomes and savings as a result of improvements to safeguarding practice:

- recent Ofsted reports which rate the service as 'adequate' moving to 'good'

- the recent adoption inspection in which the local authority was rated 'good' with some 'outstanding' areas

- placement stability for LAC and the numbers of children with a child protection plan

- feedback from external partners and the progress of children's plans for LAC and family support cases.

As a result of the new recruitment and retention strategy, there are now 80 per cent permanent staff compared to 80 per cent agency staff (who cost the organisation more) previously. There is also a saving in residential placements because care planning is more robust, and the new commissioning panel drives alternatives to the use of residential care. The savings made have been used to reshape family support.

What could have been done better?

The restructuring of the social work team took place in stages. The team have achieved a lot in a short space of time. With hindsight, one member of staff thought that the restructuring could have been done all in one go. However, she also acknowledged that, if carried out too quickly, all staff may not be committed to the changes.

Next steps

Areas for development within the immediate future are focused on ensuring that improvements in safeguarding practice are maintained. The work needs to be consolidated. The next important focus will be the quality of assessments. Staff have had risk assessment training and further work needs to be undertaken to ensure learning is translated into improvements.

Case study 3: Authority C

As one of the first authorities to undergo the new safeguarding and LAC inspection in December 2009, this local authority's safeguarding practice was classified as 'good' with a number of 'outstanding' areas and outstanding capacity to improve. Similarly, in their previous APA in 2008, the rating for staying safe was 'good'. In the annual assessment of children's services carried out in December 2010, the council was judged by Ofsted to be an organisation that exceeds minimum requirements and is performing well. This case study, undertaken in spring/summer 2011, presents local authority staff accounts of key improvements in aspects of safeguarding practice over recent years and outlines learning points for other councils.

Key learning for other councils

Key messages relating to safeguarding practice in this local authority include:

- Use effective leadership and management to facilitate change and improvement in safeguarding (this includes providing visible leadership at every level).

- Invest in the recruitment process and in staff training and development to ensure capable and knowledgeable staff.

- Invest in the development of frontline social workers and their managers.

- Develop effective relationships with the private, voluntary and community sector to ensure safeguarding is at the heart of all planning and delivery.

- Involve outside agencies or organisations in examining existing safeguarding practice as this can act as a catalyst for change and improvement.

- Proactively seek out the voice of service users to inform strategic developments, and provide opportunities for them to become actively involved in influencing service improvement.

- Ensure rigorous performance and financial management.

- Assess performance and service effectiveness by developing effective quality assurance and auditing procedures.

- Streamline the assessment process so that there is only one point of referral, in order to deal with referrals more effectively and efficiently.

Background

According to the Ofsted inspection in 2009, this local authority had a population of 43,358 children and young people. The proportion entitled to free school meals and from minority ethnic groups was below the national average. However, at that time, the percentage of pupils with English as an additional language was increasing.

Improvements in safeguarding practice

This local authority is continually seeking to improve safeguarding practice through the development of its services and progress has been made in a wide range of areas, as evidenced in the safeguarding inspection report (Ofsted 2009). A member of the LA staff said: 'We've been on a journey, years ago we were in a less good place and we've certainly moved very quickly up the ladder.' Developing strengths in the quality and management of core social care services was key in bringing about improvements in safeguarding practice in this local authority. This has been achieved through investing in the development of frontline social workers and their managers, rigorous performance and financial management,

developing quality assurance systems, and providing visible leadership at every level.

Staff were asked to comment on other recent improvements in safeguarding (post-Laming) and identified developments in four key areas:

- targeted support for families with complex needs (the Life Programme)

- referral and assessment processes, including early adoption of the common assessment

- the LSCB and quality assurance

- integrated services with the National Health Service (NHS) to support families.

The main focus of development work in this local authority relates to one of the key messages which came from the Laming review – the importance of safeguarding across all agencies, not just social care, and everyone buying in to the responsibility for safeguarding.

The description in this section includes some reference to the softer impacts resulting from improvements in practice, whilst later sections focus on evidence and harder outcomes.

Targeted support for families with complex needs

The Life Programme began with the recognition by public agencies in this local authority (the borough council, NHS, police, the Probation Service and the strategic health authority) of the need for a new approach to supporting families with complex needs. These families include, for example, those with a long history of domestic violence and anti-social behaviour, adults with mental illness, those experiencing long-term unemployment and housing issues, those with children in the care system and children not in education. Partner agencies were aware that, despite contact with a number of professionals, interventions did not always meet the needs of these families or enable sustainable change. In a

number of cases, outcomes were not improving substantially and there was a need to work with families in a different way. A member of staff at the LA said: 'We wanted to improve outcomes for families and reduce the bureaucracy and the feeling of families that they were not empowered and supported to make changes.' The Life Programme was developed in this local authority as an alternative to a Family Intervention Project (FIP) adopted in other councils.

The local authority and the NHS jointly commissioned a partner organisation to work with them on the development of a new approach. The Life Programme and methodology was co-developed by the local authority and their partners, together with families. The philosophy of the Life Programme is based on co-production (i.e. delivering services with, rather than for, service users) as evidence suggests that this is an effective way to deliver better outcomes, often for less money. Participle spent three months working with 12 local families and a range of staff to identify barriers to services and determine what systems needed to change in order to help build the capabilities of families. Families were involved in all aspects of the programme's development including, for example, the methodology, recording systems and evaluation procedures.

There are fundamental principles that make this approach different to previous ways of working with families in this local authority. The programme's philosophy is based on building the capacity of families to lead their own change process. The team supports the family to discover their aspirations and to build their own plans. As a member of LA staff said: You guide and support the family in saying, "You decide […]. You have to take control of your own life".

The Life Programme team is comprised of six staff who work with the families, plus additional administrative and management staff. It is a multi-agency team, with staff seconded from a number of organisations, including health, the police and housing. Team members have a core set of generic skills as well as specialist skills and knowledge. Families work with the team rather

than being allocated an individual key worker. This creates opportunities for different family members to bond with different team members. This approach also reduces the risk of staff burn out and increases the scope for questioning and challenge.

This local authority is looking to extend this way of working to more families (see section on next steps) and integrate the model and methods into mainstream services. Around 100 workers within the council have since been trained in the Life Programme approach. They have also introduced a Life Forum which provides opportunities for staff who have undergone the training to come together to reflect on their learning and experience of implementing this new approach.

Referral and assessment processes

Following its JAR in 2006, children's social care was tasked with improving the quality (and timeliness) of initial and core assessments. There were issues around the processes and the demand placed on specialist services due to the numbers of assessments undertaken. A very strong commitment to partnership working between NHS and the local authority developed (particularly in relation to safeguarding) and together, they sought to reduce the demand for specialist services, whilst at the same time improving outcomes for children, young people and their families. There was a joint commitment to identify children earlier and to implement the CAF. By the end of 2006, after a trial period, the CAF became authority wide. It is now embedded and used to identify need and shape services.

A CAF coordinator is now located within the referral and assessment team with the aim of achieving a 'common front door for children requiring specialist services'. This has helped to facilitate joint working between integrated locality teams and children's social care. Learning has also been enhanced through a scheme enabling other professionals to spend two days per week in the referral and assessment team. This develops professional learning at an operational level and

understanding between partner agencies. According to staff, this has resulted in a seamless service where children 'do not fall through the net' and 'are not passed from one system to another'.

LSCB and quality assurance

When the LSCB was first established there was a strong partnership between the local authority, the NHS, PCT, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the police, who worked together to drive the board forward. An independent chair was appointed in 2010. Joint working between the LSCB and the Children's Trust is effective in ensuring a shared vision across the partnership, agreeing priorities for improvement and providing rigorous independent challenge across the sector. The board has a strong QA function and has established the auditing of safeguarding processes across the agencies.

Integrated services for children, young people and families

The NHS and borough council have been working together since 2005 to develop integrated services. From 2008 to 2011, a total of 200 staff from the NHS were seconded to the local authority and were jointly managed through four integrated locality teams and through an integrated service for disabled children and young people. They include staff from the following professional groups:

- health visiting

- education support services

- school nursing

- paediatric therapy

- speech and language therapy

- youth engagement

- child health

- targeted mental health service

- Sure Start children's centre

- social work for disabled children

- family nurse partnership

- Aiming High services for disabled children

- education welfare

- education psychology

- palliative and continuing health care for

- children with complex needs

- portage/opportunity group for disabled children.

All staff are managed through integrated service managers and operational managers. Professional supervision is provided by professional leads. The common assessment and team around the child (TAC) have formed strong links with specialist social work services, which have recently become co-located with integrated services. In 2011, all staff from the NHS were transferred, under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) regulations, to the local authority as the NHS could no longer be the employer of community health staff under the transforming community services policy.

Enablers

The following were said to enable the developments and improvements discussed above:

- implementing recommendations from the JAR (in 2006)

- the high numbers of children in care acting as a driver for change

- the drive to improve standards in safeguarding from the chief executive and senior managers

- strong partnership working and the LSCB

- gathering and acting on the feedback from service users

- the knowledge and expertise of outside organisations (for example, Participle).

Barriers

The following were said to be barriers or challenges to the implementation and development of the improvements discussed above:

- ensuring that the Life Programme model of working (which includes building the capacity of families), does not compromise safeguarding – this has been addressed by ensuring safeguarding responsibilities are placed within the core principles of the Life Programme

- the number of assessments, particularly the amount of recording and the focus on the processes created by the Integrated Children's System (ICS)

- integrated locality teams were virtual teams from 2008 and only co-located in 2011 once capital funding had been secured.

Evidence of outcomes and savings

The common assessment process has been evaluated annually and this has demonstrated high satisfaction rates from parents and young people on the common assessment process, the extent to which they feel listened to and the extent to which they are provided with help to address their problems. Specific outcomes have also improved by reducing the teenage conception rate by more than 30 per cent since 1998, improving school attendance and a 5 per cent reduction in the number of LAC in 2010/11.

In addition to some of the softer impacts discussed above, there was evidence of improved outcomes

and savings as a result of improvements to safeguarding practice.

The Life Programme was said to have had a significant impact on the public sector organisations right across the local authority. It has acted as a catalyst for fundamental change and a shift in the way public services are delivered. There is a strong drive at a senior level to use this approach as a way of shaping the whole-council workforce.

A robust measurement system has identified a number of positive outcomes from the Life Programme, including:

• a reduction in domestic violence

• improvement in mental health conditions

• children's re-engagement with education

• adults seeking employment and training

• individuals seeking help for alcohol and drug problems

• parents' improved emotional support skills

• children not being taken into care/not needing a child protection plan

• a reduction in police call-outs

• positive relationships among families

• healthier lifestyles.

There was a view that the Life Programme had also brought about a greater recognition among the workforce about the importance of building on the strengths of families. In addition, families taking part in the programme have invited other families to take part and have also expressed a desire to work with and support them. Staff reported 'many of [the families] are getting jobs and actually contributing back to their local communities'. While there have been some 'cost avoidances' as a result of the work of the Life Programme (in relation to 12 families currently involved), there is a belief that cost savings will be more evident once the programme is scaled up.

The work on referral and assessment has meant that the number of common assessments has increased substantially – there are over 500 a year. A greater number of cases referred to social care have a CAF assessment.

Next steps

The local authority is bringing some of the Life Programme principles into mainstream services and looking at how they can develop the whole-systems approach for larger numbers of families. There is a programme of ongoing work to develop the model. As well as building core competencies around emotional resilience into recruitment and training, future development work includes the Life Team working with statutory social work and mental health interventions. There is also ongoing work to explore the effectiveness of the assessment process and the local authority is looking at streamlining assessments further.

Case study 4: Authority D

The rating for staying safe in this local authority's APA in 2008 was 'outstanding', and in their safeguarding and LAC inspection in November 2009 the safeguarding service within this local authority was classified as 'good'. At the recent unannounced Ofsted inspection in 2011, safeguarding practice was rated as 'outstanding'. This case study, undertaken in spring 2011, presents local authority staff accounts of improvements to safeguarding practice over recent years and details learning points for other councils.

Key learning for other councils

Key messages relating to safeguarding practice in this local authority include:

- Recruit competent and experienced operational and management staff who understand safeguarding.

- Retain good quality staff and ensure a stable workforce by providing support for professional growth and development.

- Ensure senior managers provide visible leadership and have an understanding of what is happening on the front line.

- Provide social workers with effective management support so they have the necessary competencies and skills to do the job.

- Foster a no-blame culture so that social workers can be open and share their concerns with managers.

- Encourage social workers to reflect on their practice and focus on their personal development and training to improve service delivery.

- Ensure good systemic partnership working by encouraging effective communication with other agencies at all levels.

- Achieve a shared vision among partners to develop safeguarding performance.

Background

According to the Ofsted inspection in November 2009, this local authority had a population of 65,156 children and young people aged 0–18. At this time, nearly 26 per cent of the school population was classified as belonging to a black or minority ethnic group compared to 21.3 per cent in England overall and a third of pupils spoke English as an additional language. At the time of the inspection, there were 438 LAC. A significant number of children and young people seeking asylum arrive each year in this local authority via the international airport.

Improvements in safeguarding practice

This local authority is continually seeking to improve safeguarding practice through the development of its services and significant progress has been made in this area as evidenced in the local authority's recent unannounced inspection (Ofsted 2011). Staff were asked to comment on recent improvements in safeguarding (post-Laming review) and identified developments in five key areas:

- recruitment and retention

- management support

- reflective practice, supervision and training

- interagency working

- working with schools.

The description in this section includes some reference to the softer impacts resulting from

improvements in practice, whilst later sections focus on evidence and harder outcomes.

Recruitment and retention

The permanence and stability of the workforce, particularly middle management, was said to be central to providing consistently good safeguarding practice in this local authority.

There have been a number of developments in terms of recruitment, for example, only NQSWs with a higher-level degree are now appointed to the service. The induction process for new staff has also been reviewed and improved by making it more supportive and reflective. There is a culture of promoting staff from within and a career pathway has been set up for social workers in order to retain staff and build capacity. As part of the new career structure, a number of agency staff have been given permanent positions and there is now less staff turnover.

There are highly experienced, competent service managers leading area teams, many of whom have worked in this local authority for over ten years. This stability helps new staff to feel supported. There was also a view that experienced home-grown managers with an understanding of the local context help to ensure decision-making is better informed: 'We don't have to keep learning the lessons, they have been learnt. They are part of the history and culture of the organisation because the middle management are still here to pass the lessons on' (service manager). According to staff, management decisions are grounded in relevant experience and as a result there is a greater willingness to change and develop among the workforce.

Management support

In this local authority, small social work teams have been established with a good ratio of managers to social workers and a high level of management oversight. Deputy team managers and senior practitioners provide support and

mentoring for the less experienced social workers. As well as providing clear leadership, managers have a can-do and we're all in this together approach. There is a high level of accountability and a no-blame culture. Social workers feel able to approach managers with their concerns and know that they will be listened to. Managers are hands on and available to support their staff. For example, the head of the referral and assessment team spends time working on the duty desk alongside other staff. As a result, they are aware of the strengths of individual staff and their areas for development.

Managers ensure that staff have manageable workloads and are equipped with the required skills and competencies to do their job. Procedures have been put in place to ensure appropriate delegation of cases according to experience. Frontline staff in the initial assessment team, for example, no longer undertake Section 47 investigations (where children are considered to be at risk of significant harm). Where there is a likelihood of child protection issues, cases are passed to the child protection team which is comprised of more experienced senior practitioners.

Reflective practice, supervision and training

The local authority continues to invest in training and development, despite current financial pressures. Staff are committed to achieving high standards and the local authority is able to address performance issues quickly through training and development.

Group sessions on reflective practice, which were originally set up for new social workers, have proved particularly successful and have been extended to all staff within the family support service. These two-hourly sessions are held once a month and managers are committed to protecting this time for staff. These sessions give social workers an opportunity to voice issues and provide an opportunity for heads of service to meet with staff on a regular basis. Practitioners welcome the

opportunity to learn from each other and share good practice. They were reported to enjoy the sessions because 'they go back to what social work is all about'. There has also been a greater emphasis on clinical supervision for all staff and the local authority has commissioned a forensic supervision model from the Tavistock Clinic (a recognised provider of clinical services). This allows practitioners to discuss cases in a safe environment.

A pilot programme of 'social work pods' was introduced in this local authority in September 2010. Workers in a pod have a shared understanding of all cases, with an emphasis on early intervention and family support. The model involves weekly reflective practice meetings with management oversight and has resulted in high staff morale, improved recruitment and retention of staff and consistently high standards of practice being achieved. Due to the success of social work pods, the model is now being rolled out to the Children in Need Service.

A greater number of opportunities for training have been created. Every year there is an expectation that four or five practitioners undertake the post-graduate diploma in childcare, which the local authority operates in partnership with a university. Learning opportunities have also been developed for social workers who have career aspirations but who need support to progress into management level roles. The local authority has introduced a new internal academy-level leadership programme which focuses on cultural change and approaches to delivering high quality services under the current climate of financial constraints.

Interagency working

Within the LSCB, there is a strong foundation of partnership working and a focus on the improvement of safeguarding practice. There is buy-in from partner agencies at the most senior level and the independent chair is proactive in meeting with agencies and resolving emerging issues.

There has been a recent change to the make-up of the directorate so that children's social care is now located together with adult social care. Meetings with adult social care are now held on a weekly basis and there is greater level of joint working between the two directorates, for example, in relation to specific families where parents have mental health issues, where families are involved in court proceedings or have housing issues.

Strong relationships with partner agencies have been developed at all levels, including, for example, with health, the police and the UK Border Agency (UKBA). Staff stability and regular meetings/contacts have facilitated this process. According to staff, effective safeguarding practice comes from having an effective infrastructure in place and meetings where information can be shared openly amongst practitioners.

In terms of health, for example, a social worker from the assessment team attends mental health meetings on a regular basis and another social worker attends paediatric hospital ward rounds. Joint meetings with the public protection unit (the police) have also been established and the referral and assessment service has committed a social work manager to work on the public protection desk for part of the week. In addition to strengthening partnership working, this has contributed to increased efficiency through 'filtering out' referrals from the police that did not meet required thresholds. The Children in Need Service has also committed one of its managers to sit on the team around the child (TAC) panel (where multi-disciplinary discussions about cases take place) so that inappropriate referrals can be avoided. As a result, other agencies have a better understanding of the service's work.

Social care staff now attend regular meetings with UKBA and airport staff and this was reported to have improved airport officials' understanding of safeguarding issues. There is a child trafficking and exploitation sub-group, which reports to the LSCB and involves all the agencies in the locality, including immigration officers and the strategic manager of the UKBA, together with some national organisations including the Child

Exploitation and Online Protection Agency (CEOP) and End Child Prostitution and Trafficking team (ECPAT). There are fortnightly multi-agency operational meetings which include social workers from the asylum-seekers intake team and from the referral and assessment team, immigration officers from the airport, staff from the police child investigation team, and the airport intelligence unit. Children entering the UK through the airport in the previous two weeks are discussed at these meetings and issues of safeguarding, risk of trafficking and the risk of going missing are highlighted. This way of working, which has been led by the LSCB, has encouraged the agencies to have joint responsibilities for these children. There are also monthly operational meetings focusing on children who go missing within the community, where safeguarding issues are addressed.

Working with schools

There are more than 90 schools in this local authority and the authority has worked to build good relationships with schools in order to enhance safeguarding practice and processes. A lead manager is responsible for a number of schools and there are regular meetings between them and school staff. This engenders trust and facilitates effective joint working. Through this, schools have been made more aware of their safeguarding responsibilities. Every school has a designated teacher for child protection. According to the head of service: 'It is a live infrastructure, with termly meetings and regular briefings for designated teachers.'

There have been an increasing number of allegations against local authority staff (four or five per week) in the last few years, especially those working in schools. The authority has therefore created a human resources sub-group which aims to develop policy and procedure in this area. All schools, through the Schools' Forum and the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), have funded an allegations manager who deals with all allegations against staff. There is also a full-time education post to manage allegations against staff in schools. This manager provides support for teachers going

through the allegation process. The manager advises about whether the allegation meets the threshold for prosecution, whether there should be a child protection investigation or whether there should be internal human resources disciplinary action. The manager also advises on referral to professional bodies, such as the General Teaching Council (GTC), or the independent safeguarding local authority.

Enablers

The following were said to enable the developments and improvements discussed above:

- managers who know how to manage staff appropriately and have a good understanding of safeguarding so there is faith in their decision making

- a no-blame culture, but a culture of challenge and one of learning from mistakes

- a culture of strong partnership working within the local authority over a number of years

- a commitment to partnership working at all levels.

Barriers

The following were said to be barriers or challenges to the implementation and development of the improvements discussed above:

- the electronic recording system, as this is time consuming

- the reduced local authority budget and the changing financial climate.

Evidence of outcomes and savings

In addition to some of the softer impacts discussed above, there was evidence of improved outcomes and savings as a result of improvements to safeguarding practice:

- a higher percentage of permanent staff and fewer numbers of agency staff

- a reduction in the number of inappropriate referrals

- a reduction in the numbers of LAC as a result of improved interagency and preventative work

- a reduction in the number of children going missing from the airport, or from care.

- a reduction in the number of first time entrants into the criminal justice system

- commendation for the support provided for social workers and the high morale of staff evidenced in a recent Ofsted inspection

- praise for the relationship between social workers and the police in a recent Ofsted inspection.

There were said to be cost savings in having a stable workforce, effective case management and effective management oversight and supervision.

What could have been done better?

According to staff, the ICS protocol could have been improved by simplifying it and making it more user-friendly.

Next steps

There is a focus on developing further relationships with other agencies, particularly the police. Joint protocols with drug agencies are also being developed. The local authority would like to secure a commitment for a drugs worker to be physically based in the social care building one day a week. A further development would be the co-location of the public protection desk and children's social care in one building.

The local authority is also working on reducing the numbers of children placed out of borough. A wraparound service for foster carers has been proposed and the recruitment of clinical psychologists and outreach workers to support them is under way.

Case study 5: Authority E

In 2008, this local authority's APA rating for staying safe was 'outstanding'. An Ofsted safeguarding and LAC inspection in May 2010 also classified the local authority as 'outstanding' for its safeguarding practice. This case study, undertaken in spring 2011, presents local authority staff accounts of improvements to safeguarding practice over the last few years and the key learning for other councils.

Key learning for other councils

Key messages relating to safeguarding practice in this local authority include:

- Senior managers, councillors and lead portfolio holders should assure themselves that staff, systems, processes and frameworks are working as effectively as possible and have an understanding of what is happening on the front line.

- Appoint effective frontline supervisors and managers, and provide them with the necessary training and support.

- Set clear expectations and embed performance management and quality assurance procedures in practice.

- Use ongoing auditing to enable frontline managers to record issues and feed these back into staff supervision in order to improve practice.

- Invest time and money in the support and development of social workers, particularly NQSWs.

- Be proactive in enabling social workers to have a voice and include them in the development of services.

- Target resources effectively by focusing on preventative services and developing a wide range of services.

- Develop locality-based panels where staff representing all children's services discuss individual cases in order to make effective use of resources and to share the risk.

Background

According to the Ofsted report, in May 2010, the population of this local authority included 150,828 children and young people aged 0–18. The proportion entitled to free school meals and from minority ethnic groups were below the national average, although the percentage of pupils who speak English as a second language has increased in the last few years.

The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) was established in 2006 and became the Children's Trust Board in April 2010. The Board is chaired by the DCS and is well represented by the appropriate partners and agencies.

Social care services for children are delivered by a number of family assessment and support teams, integrated (health and social care) locality teams, children in public care teams, fostering and adoption teams, and a social care and health team for children and young people with disabilities.

Improvements in safeguarding practice

Recent improvements and developments were identified in the areas of:

- performance management and information

- auditing and safeguarding assurance days

- locality teams and the integration of services

- development of preventative services

- support and development of social workers

- social work forum.

The description in this section includes some reference to the impacts resulting from improvements in practice, whilst later sections focus on evidence and harder outcomes.

Performance management and information

Performance management is embedded in practice. Daily reports are sent to managers regarding the numbers of children subject to child protection plans and the numbers of LAC. Weekly reports on data and performance are sent to the senior management team. A monthly bulleted report is produced and issues within it are addressed by the executive departmental management team (with the lead portfolio holder) and the departmental management team. The Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee also have regular updates of management information from which they extrapolate areas for development, as do the Children's Trust Board and the LSCB.

Frontline managers now have performance information 'at the tip of their fingers'. The data captured within performance reports facilitates the management of care planning and the allocation of work. Hotspots or areas of difficulty can be identified by line managers and strategies can be put in place to address them.

Auditing and safeguarding assurance days

Qualitative themed audits (for example, whole-team audits), which are based on the Ofsted criteria, are undertaken. Auditing is now an ongoing and 'active' process. Previously team managers conducted audits by examining files and

reviewing cases. There was additional training for frontline managers to help them embed the process in practice. There is an audit tool on each case file which is used as a tool to record and track issues which are then fed back into staff supervision. Auditing ensures senior managers know what is happening on the front line and allows frontline managers to see that a case is being dealt with to an appropriate standard.

In addition, safeguarding assurance days are held on a bi-monthly basis around the county. On these days the DCS, the lead portfolio holder and the AD observe frontline teams. They talk to the staff and go out with them on home visits. They attend case conferences, reviews, and core meetings. This gives senior managers a good understanding of social workers' concerns and what is happening on the front line. According to the AD: 'It is important to know your teams and their strengths and their weaknesses.' In addition, they are 'visible' to the social workers and they are also able to talk to service users about the service they receive.

A social work forum enables social worker issues to be presented to senior managers (see the social work forum section for more details).

Locality teams and the integration of services

This local authority has integrated targeted services, with social work teams in locality teams. This integration allows service managers to consider resources collectively and therefore to target resources more effectively. The family team can draw on a range of resources. There is a whole-team approach to service delivery, which means that social workers do not struggle to meet all the family's needs alone. This strategy is supported by the CYPSP and the LSCB which is committed to ensuring safe and effective services across the locality.

There is one assessment tool for the delivery of services, which helps ensure consistency and more effective use of resources.

On a locality basis, resource panels engage staff from all elements of children's services and examine cases on the 'cusp of care' and the cases of those who are in care who could be returned to their families. Resource panels were said to be 'highly successful' in enabling social workers to access a range of resources and in jointly sharing the safeguarding risk. This has proved to be a very useful strategy in keeping children within their families and in signing up other children's services to this principle.

Referrals are managed initially in the customer service centre, where information and advice is given to children and families. According to the recent Ofsted safeguarding inspection, the customer service team screens all contacts safely and effectively to signpost families to services that best meet their needs. The customer service centre acquires good quality information from their initial contact and, as a result, all referrals to social care assessment teams are appropriate and decisions to undertake initial assessments are actioned within 24 hours of the referral. Child protection referrals are responded to swiftly, ensuring that children and young people are safeguarded. The majority of social care referrals lead to an initial assessment and almost 90 per cent of assessments are undertaken within a specified timescale. A high proportion of these initial assessments move into a core assessment.

According to the recent Ofsted safeguarding inspection, interagency and locality working is successfully embedded across districts and partners, and users of services evidence that the multi-agency TAC arrangements are working well.

Development of preventative services

A focus on the development of a whole host of preventative services enables concerns to be picked up early and ensures that need is met early on thus obviating the need for a specialist service. The development of preventative services has included, for example, the establishment of family group conferences. The Family Group Conference (FGC) team works with families to come up with their own solutions to problems. The team's role tends to be one of mediation.

Preventative services for children and their families, for example, are successfully and safely reducing the numbers of children entering the care system. Staff respond to contacts and referrals well, ensuring risks posed to children are effectively managed and any child protection concerns are swiftly actioned by suitably qualified and experienced staff.

Together with the LSCB, the CYPSP is effectively targeting resources across the broad safeguarding agenda to ensure children in the locality are safe. According to the recent Ofsted safeguarding inspection, the CYPSP's strategic commitment to providing early support to families has resulted in a transfer of resources from specialist to universal services. The use of the CAF and the TAC are also ensuring that children and their families receive the right services at the right time.

Support and development of social workers

The SMT have shown their commitment to the support and development of social workers by removing some of the responsibilities of principal practitioners to free up their time so they are more available to staff. The role of frontline managers has been enhanced as it is thought to be 'a pivotal role' in supporting staff. There is an extensive training programme for managers and frontline staff. According to the recent Ofsted safeguarding inspection, workforce planning and development are effective. Managers are empowered to make decisions and they and their staff know their service well.

The training needs of NQSWs have been formally identified and a specific programme developed for them. This includes extra supervision, support with court cases and with case conferences, as well as staff support groups. A protected caseload was introduced so there is a limit to the number, type and level of cases NQSWs hold. They are introduced to child protection cases gradually,

through consultation and co-working. According to a principal practitioner: 'It is harder work but worth it and good to see NQSWs become more confident and to see them develop.'

In addition, the advanced practitioner role has been developed within teams to take child protection referrals. This allows social workers who prefer not to become managers to stay in social work practice and receive an increased salary. They have a smaller caseload of more complex cases. This helps develop safeguarding expertise.

Social work forum

The social work forum brings together all elements of social care and enables social workers to have a voice. The forum is seen by the AD as 'a proactive way of capturing social workers' views'. Forum meetings are held every two to three months and are chaired by a team manager and a principal practitioner. Each team has a representative at the forum who feeds back to their team meeting. The minutes of the meeting are published and are accessible to all staff. The AD is very committed to the forum and attends regularly. The forum allows staff to bring their concerns to the attention of senior managers. In addition, the SMT can set the forum tasks to report back on. For example, they were given money for a project manager to support them in examining how services should be reconfigured. The forum 'improves and facilitates' communication between the SMT and the social workers. It was described by the team manager as 'a really positive development' over and above the normal communication channels. According to the principal practitioner, it is important for staff to be listened to and for them to be part of the development of services.

Enablers

The following were said to enable the developments and improvements discussed above:

- the commitment of lead members, together with investment and a clear direction from senior managers

- a supportive SMT who actively encourage staff to be creative and come up with ideas for service improvement

- robust partnership working through the CYPSP: 'We cannot deliver without this' (AD)

- good communication within teams and between senior managers and teams, especially in a large county

- a flat management structure and senior managers who work across children's services

- A performance management culture that drives improvement across the service.

Barriers

The following were said to be barriers or challenges to the implementation and development of the improvements discussed above:

- the development of academies, which may allow schools to 'shut the door' and not work in partnership

- the challenges of making changes to the ICS protocol

- the challenges resulting from the economic recession

- the rural nature of the county, making home visits time consuming for social workers.

Evidence of outcomes and savings

In addition to some of the impacts discussed above, there was evidence of improved outcomes and savings as a result of improvements to safeguarding practice:

- a small number of out of county placements despite being a large local authority

- a reduction in the number of LAC (as a result of early intervention) has led to reinvestment in preventative services.

- a reduction in the number of children worked with at a specialist level

- reduced caseloads.

Next steps

The next steps identified were:

- continuation and expansion of preventative services

- implementation of the Munro recommendations

- the appointment of a chief social worker to represent the views of social workers regarding policy, practice and training

- reconfiguration of family support services to bring greater clarity of methodology and direct work with children

- more effective use of resources

- establishment of community budget teams – known as Family Working Together teams

- the new core offer for children's centres – reaching out to more vulnerable children and families

- greater use of evidence-based practice and research

- developing capacity in the community to help sustain and deliver youth service provision.

Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the 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/
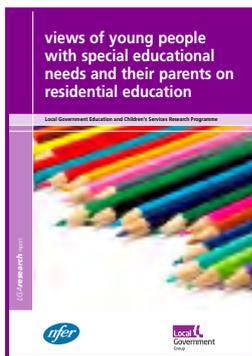
Views of young people with SEN and their parents on residential education

This report explores families' experiences of residential education for young people with SEN or a disability, and their views on the placement process. Based on interviews with 25 parents and seven young people, the report reflects on their experiences and draws out the implications for local authorities and service providers.

http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGRC01
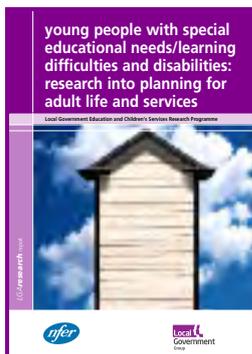
Planning for adult life and services for young people with SEN/LDD

The process of transition to adulthood for young people with SEN/LDD can be difficult and not always successful. Based on interviews with parents, young people and professionals in six local authorities, this report highlights key priorities and includes examples of recent initiatives.

http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SENT01
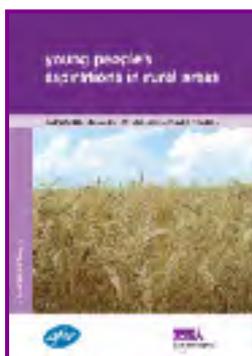
Young people's aspirations in rural areas

Youth unemployment is a serious issue affecting rural areas. One possible cause is believed to be low aspirations among young people, their families and the local community. Based on a rapid review of literature and case-study visits, this report explores the influence and impact of low aspirations.

http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LYPA01

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.

LGG research report

Local Authority (LA) approaches to developing safeguarding practices in the light of recent independent reviews of safeguarding and child protection (Laming, 2009 and Munro, 2011) are explored in this report through localised accounts of practice implementation and, where possible, evidence of outcomes. The report outlines the views and experiences of senior local authority officers, collected through telephone interviews, in relation to key developments in safeguarding practices in their LAs post Laming.

- The main priority areas for improving safeguarding included: leadership and management; recruiting, maintaining and retaining a highly competent workforce; quality assurance and performance management; referral and assessment processes and procedures; and partnership working.

- Specific conditions and factors influenced the improvement of safeguarding practices including: the commitment of local authority leaders; the facilitating approach of strategic and operational managers; existing structures underpinning partnership working; workforce attitudes and characteristics; and specific local authority contexts and circumstances.

- A small number of barriers and challenges to improving safeguarding were identified, these centred on: process and systemic challenges, challenges to partnership working and external local contexts and circumstances.

- Good and emerging practice was evident despite current difficult economic times and system-level challenges. The local authorities involved had or were developing the necessary structures, systems and effective working cultures to support continued reform of child protection.