

# safeguarding children peer review programme: learning and recommendations

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# safeguarding children peer review programme: learning and recommendations

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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>1 The aims of the study</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 An overview of safeguarding peer reviews</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3 Reasons for engaging in a safeguarding children peer review</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4 Impacts of a safeguarding children peer review</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1 Increased commitment and drive to make improvements	6
4.2 Development of ideas, plans and actions	7
4.3 Promotion of learning and reflective practice	8
4.4 Revision of policies, procedures and systems	8
4.5 Improvement in staff morale and relations	8
4.6 Affirmation and enhancement of the quality of partnership working	9
4.7 Impacts on peers	10
<b>5 Key benefits and challenges</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1 Format and structure of the review process	11
5.2 The peer review team	13
5.3 Communication between peers and the local authority	15
5.4 Organisational and contextual factors	16
<b>6 Learning and recommendations for LG Improvement and Development and the sector</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>20</b>

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# Executive summary

## Introduction and background

The Local Government Group commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an independent research study to draw out key messages and learning from the safeguarding children peer review programme. Led by Local Government (LG) Improvement and Development, the safeguarding peer review programme aims to stimulate local discussion about how local authorities and their partners can become more effective in delivering improved safe outcomes for children and young people. Peer review is not an inspection; the intention is that peers will offer a supportive but challenging approach to assist local authorities and their partners in celebrating their strengths and identifying their own areas for improvement.

## The research study

In order to gather a broad perspective on the peer review programme, five local authorities that had undergone the peer review process were selected for involvement. In choosing the authorities, consideration was given to their size, geographical location and the length of time since their participation in the review. Forty-three telephone interviews were conducted with a selection of staff from local authorities and their partners, as well as with a range of peers from the review teams of those local authorities. Interviews were carried out between August 2010 and February 2011.

## Key findings

### Reasons for engaging in a safeguarding children peer review

In broad terms, three main rationales reportedly drive local authorities' engagement in a safeguarding children peer review:

- **Authentic and real-world reflective practice and improvement.** Local authorities consider safeguarding children peer reviews to be a valid and effective form of evaluation that complements other internal and external forms of monitoring. Peer reviews are used as a means to scrutinise performance, including identifying areas of weakness as well as validating existing good practice.
- **Specific service or process improvement.** For some interviewees, the rationale for undertaking a peer review is much more specific. Local authorities identify key areas which they believe require further attention and ask the review team to explore. These areas include, for example, looked-after children, education, health, child protection proceedings and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.
- **Preparation and planning for inspections.** Although it is made quite clear to local authorities that the safeguarding peer review is not intended to emulate a formal inspection or external audit of local services, a good number of interviewees see the key purpose of a peer review as preparation for an inspection. Ofsted visits were said to be imminent in several authorities at the time of their review.

### Impacts of a safeguarding children peer review

Impacts resulting from a safeguarding children peer review include:

- increased commitment and drive to make improvements in safeguarding
- development of ideas, plans and actions
- promotion of learning and reflective practice
- revision of policies, processes and systems

- improvement in staff morale and relations
- affirmation and enhancement of the quality of partnership working.

Interviewees suggest exercising some caution in attributing changes to the peer review alone. Nearly all of the local authorities involved in this study have undergone an inspection since the peer review (including announced and unannounced inspections by Ofsted), and several have had a change in senior leadership. Interviewees feel that a combination of these factors, as well as the peer review, is likely to have led to the positive developments they identify.

### Effective features of a safeguarding children peer review

The key features that interviewees consider to be of particular importance in shaping the success of a safeguarding children peer review can be classified under four categories:

- **the format and structure of the review process**, including the framework and methodology used for conducting the review, its breadth of focus, and the management and leadership of the LG Improvement and Development review manager
- **the composition of the peer review team**, including the expertise and gravitas of peers, and their training and understanding of the review process
- **communication between peers and the local authority**, for example, where the review team acts as a 'critical friend' to the local authority, rather than forming or delivering a judgement
- **organisational and contextual factors** relating to the host local authority, including the local authorities' commitment to the peer review process, as well as their openness and willingness to engage constructively with peers.

### Learning and recommendations for LG Improvement and Development and the sector

The findings of this study indicate there is capacity for future development and expansion of the programme as it becomes further embedded and refined. Some suggested areas for future development are:

- exploring opportunities for the further recruitment of peers to ensure that the ongoing involvement of senior peers is sustainable
- developing the safeguarding children peer review programme as a self-assessment tool, supporting mutual learning and improvement between local authorities
- tailoring the review more closely to the requirements of the commissioning local authority, for example, by offering it a staged approach to the review, from a broad scope to a more specific review of a key aspect of safeguarding practice
- investigating further ways to build some follow-up contact into the standard review procedure, and developing ways to encourage local authorities to engage in this process in order to maximise the benefits of the programme
- developing the format so there are opportunities for peers to receive feedback post-review and providing ways to ensure that targets and action planning arising from the review can be effectively fed back more widely to local authority staff
- exploring further ways of maximising multi-agency involvement in the planning and delivery of the safeguarding peer review programme, both in terms of representation on the peer review team and the involvement of a wider range of agencies in interviews and feedback sessions.



# 1 The aims of the study

The Local Government Group commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an independent external research study focusing on the safeguarding children peer review programme led by Local Government (LG) Improvement and Development.

The aim of this study is to draw out learning from the safeguarding children peer review programme by gathering reflections on the peer review process and its outcomes for local authorities and peers. This report aims to:

- outline what has changed locally as a result of undergoing a safeguarding children peer review
- highlight the benefits for local authorities of undergoing a safeguarding children peer review
- draw together lessons and learning which can be shared with the sector and LG Improvement and Development.

In order to gather a broad perspective on the peer review programme, five local authorities that had undergone the peer review process were selected for involvement. In choosing the authorities, consideration was given to their size, geographical location and the length of time since their participation in the review. The local authorities chosen comprised three unitary authorities, a city council and a London borough.

A total of 43 telephone interviews were conducted with a selection of local authority staff (and their partners) as well as with a range of peers from the review teams of those local authorities. Interviews

were carried out between August 2010 and February 2011. Table 1 provides details on the number of interviewees by job roles.

**Table 1 Numbers of interviewees by job roles**

Local authority staff	Peer review teams
• senior managers (5)	• directors of children’s services (DCS)/assistant directors (5)
• frontline staff/middle managers (3)	• senior councillors (3)
• council members (2)	• clinical and/or managerial health leads for children (5)
• Local Safeguarding Children’s Board (LSCB) Chairs (2)	• operational social care staff (5)
• external partners/other key stakeholders (4)	• LG Improvement and Development managers/consultants (5)
• voluntary sector staff (1)	• safeguarding experts (3)

This report sets out the findings of the interviews with peers, local authority representatives and their partners. It covers:

- an overview of safeguarding children peer reviews(Chapter 2)
- reasons for engaging in a safeguarding children peer review (Chapter 3)
- impacts of a safeguarding children peer review (Chapter 4)
- key benefits and challenges (Chapter 5)
- learning and recommendations for LG Improvement and Development and the sector (Chapter 6).

## 2 An overview of safeguarding peer reviews

Professor Eileen Munro, in the interim report of her review of child protection, suggested that embedding a systematic process of peer reviews within the culture of local authorities and partner agencies could help to facilitate learning throughout the system. She concluded that 'given the uncertainties in child protection and the inability of data to be an effective predictor or indicator of performance issues, it is important that peer reviews become normative'. She proposes that in the future, peer reviews could operate in parallel with the development of a revised inspection framework (Munro, 2011 p.85).

The LG Improvement and Development safeguarding peer review programme aims to stimulate local discussion about how local authorities and their partners can become more effective in delivering improved safe outcomes for children and young people. Peer review is not an inspection; the intention is that peers will offer a supportive but challenging approach to assist local authorities and their partners in celebrating their strengths and identifying their own areas for improvement. The aims of the peer review are to:

- provide an accurate reflection on practice from a critical friend
- build confidence and strengthen local partnerships
- sustain improvement and quality in safeguarding
- encourage learning and innovation
- offer high quality expertise and advice (at low cost)
- stimulate local discussion and improvement.

LG Improvement and Development convenes a team from a pool of trained peers to deliver each peer review. The safeguarding children peer team represents the variety of interests in an integrated children's sector and typically comprises:

- a peer review manager (LG Improvement and Development manager/consultant)
- a director/assistant director of children's services (as peer review team leader)
- an operational manager/senior social work practitioner
- a health representative (typically a senior manager from a Primary Care Trust [PCT] with a safeguarding background)
- a lead member for children's services
- an off-site assistant director (to provide a review of local authority documentation and data).

There may also be representation from the third sector and police, depending on local arrangements and requirements. Councils are also offered the option of involving other specialist peers, for example, a peer with expertise in the field of looked-after children. LG Improvement and Development agrees the suitability of the review team with the local authority prior to the visit.

On average, each peer commits five days to a review, with the team leader usually committing one or two additional days for pre- and post-work. Peer review activities include:

- a review of key documents and data
- the completion of a self-evaluation questionnaire by the local authority and key partners
- a case file mapping exercise completed by a local multi-agency team
- peer review team visits and interviews during the review's on-site week

- a 'feedback and prioritisation' conference
- an agreed final letter/report outlining the peer review team's recommendations.

The off-site peer analyses all documents and data and prepares early findings for the team. This analysis is used by the review team to develop hypotheses for

exploration during the on-site visit. The team are asked to reflect on this analysis and other background information produced by the local authority prior to the on-site visit. For further details on the methodology of the peer review, see the Safeguarding Children Peer Review Guidance Manual (LG Improvement and Development, 2011).

### 3 Reasons for engaging in a safeguarding children peer review

In broad terms, three main rationales reportedly drive local authorities' engagement in the safeguarding children peer review process:

- authentic and real-world reflective practice and improvement
- specific service or process improvement
- preparation and planning for inspections.

One of the main reasons local authorities decide to engage in an LG Improvement and Development safeguarding children peer review is because they consider them to be a **valid and effective form of evaluation**. Peer reviews are seen as valuable mechanism for helping authorities maintain standards and further improve performance in relation to safeguarding children. In particular, peer reviews are felt to provide **added benefits compared to other internal and external forms of monitoring**.

There is an obvious commitment to self-examination and self-improvement among the local authorities included in this study. Interviewees report, for example, that the safeguarding children peer review was commissioned because the local authority is 'outward-looking' and 'interested in continued improvement'. Peer reviews are used as a means **to scrutinise performance**, including identifying areas of weakness as well as validating existing good practice.

*We were very much wanting to get a gauge of how we were getting on, and about our standards and issues that would help us with our service improvement. (Local authority interviewee)*

*It's very easy to get very caught up in your own organisation and the way you are doing things. To have somebody else from outside come in and look at the organisation is a really valuable exercise. It stops you from getting too narrowly focused on what you do, and helps you look beyond the organisation and say actually we could do this differently. (Local authority interviewee)*

Councils 'self-select' to undergo a safeguarding children peer review, and it is often the case that the local authorities involved consider their safeguarding practice to be generally well developed. They tend to be aware of the main areas in need of improvement at the outset, but are using the review to gain an independent perspective of services and practice. One interviewee speaks about the peer review providing 'a general health check' for the local authority.

For some local authority interviewees, the rationale for undertaking a peer review is much more specific. While there is an established review framework with core lines of enquiry, the process is flexible and allows local authorities to identify particular issues that they would like the review team to explore. These areas include, for example:

- **looked-after children** (including the quality of provision, and the budgetary implications of high numbers of looked-after children)
- **education** (including an exploration of how the Common Assessment Framework [CAF] is embedded in schools)
- **health** (including the role of the joint commissioning unit, partnership working with the Child and Adult Mental Health Service [CAMHS] and enhancing the benefits of safeguarding improvement visits conducted by the National Health Service [NHS])
- **child protection proceedings** (such as to support an ongoing review of family support services, and responding to high numbers of children currently in proceedings)
- **processes and arrangements** (for example, collaborative training and development opportunities with other local authorities, and responding to the current financial climate)

- **Local Safeguarding Children’s Board (LSCB)** (for example, multi-agency representation of the LSCB and clarity around their role and remit).

Indeed, the ability for local authorities to set their own aims and objectives for the review is felt to be helpful: ‘If you’re requesting a peer review it’s down to you to decide what it is that you’re most interested in the review team looking at.’ (Local authority interviewee).

Although it is made quite clear to local authorities that the safeguarding peer review is not intended to emulate a formal inspection or external audit of local services, a good number of interviewees see the key purpose of a peer review as **preparation for an inspection**. Indeed, visits by Ofsted were said to be imminent in several authorities at the time of their review. A small number of interviewees describe how the peer review would be used as evidence to demonstrate to Ofsted that the local authority is committed to self-improvement.

*It’s a brilliant test-bed for an authority to check out where they are at in terms of their safeguarding, and to do that in a very safe, unthreatening way, unlike the experience of an inspection. It’s a great way to prepare for an inspection.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*It gives [local authorities] an opportunity to put the spotlight on an area that you couldn’t do yourself because you would be asking the questions, and you wouldn’t necessarily get the open and honest answers.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*It was about having the critical friend lens but without the scariness of inspections.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

*I think it is good preparation for an inspection, because although inspections are different in their methodology they are similar in the questions that are asked and the data and evidence that is looked at and the way that conclusions are fed back. It’s helpful to go through the process and start thinking and being quite self-aware and challenging yourself before the inspectors come in and challenge you to do it.*  
(Peer interviewee)

In some ways, peer reviews are perceived as a trial run for Ofsted inspections, prompting local authorities to collate relevant data and documentation to evidence practice and performance in advance. Peer reviews are also seen as an opportunity for staff to practise how they might convey messages most effectively to external reviewers. In this way, peer reviews are considered to be particularly beneficial because there are perceived to be no negative consequences for the authority should any shortcomings be identified.

A few local authority interviewees report being unclear about the purpose of the peer review, particularly where safeguarding practice is perceived to be generally effective. Issues around how the aims of the peer review are communicated to local authority staff are explored in section 5.3. Other interviewees surmise that some local authorities have underlying reasons for undertaking a peer review that are not always stated openly.

*When scoping out a peer review there is a formal reason for why we are there but there are also likely to be some explicit subtleties to the reasons for why we are there. A new DCS might want to set a benchmark to drive activity or the DCS might be worried about certain areas in the service.*  
(Peer interviewee)

## 4 Impacts of a safeguarding children peer review

Local authorities and peers are generally very positive about the peer review and speak about benefits for the both the authority and for themselves personally. Feedback suggests that the peer review certainly has the potential to impact positively on local safeguarding arrangements. However, the impacts should be interpreted in view of certain caveats. As there is no formal follow-up contact built into the review process, peers often have no further communication with the local authorities they review and, as a result, generally feel unable to comment on how the recommendations of the team have been taken forward. Equally, where peer reviews were undertaken fairly recently, it is difficult for interviewees to demonstrate major developments since this time. More generally, the timings of the safeguarding children peer reviews have coincided with significant national cuts to local authority budgets and, as a result, some local authorities perceive that their approach to developing the review teams' recommendations has had to be prioritised.

While some interviewees are able to highlight improvements in safeguarding services locally, they suggest exercising some caution in attributing these changes to the peer review alone. Nearly all of the local authorities involved in this study have undergone an inspection (including announced and unannounced inspections by Ofsted) since the peer review and several have had a change in senior leadership. Interviewees feel that it is likely to be a combination of these factors as well as the peer review that have led to the positive developments they identify. With these caveats in mind, this section of the report considers the impact of the safeguarding children peer review for local authorities.

Impacts can be categorised under six broad headings:

- increased commitment and drive to make improvements
- development of ideas, plans and actions
- promotion of learning and reflective practice

- revision of policies, procedures and systems
- improvement in staff morale and relations
- affirmation and enhancement of the quality of partnership working.

These are discussed in the following six sections. The final section of this chapter briefly looks at the impacts of the safeguarding children peer review for peers.

### 4.1 Increased commitment and drive to make improvements

Local authorities report that peer reviews are an effective driver for developing safeguarding locally and that key areas of safeguarding practice receive greater priority as a result of the review. One interviewee comments: 'It's helped us enormously because it's [safeguarding] such a big area that you can get distracted from where the crucial attention is needed.' In some ways, the recommendations made by peers provide staff, particularly those at an operational level, with a sense of legitimacy for pursuing changes to practice in areas which they had already identified for development.

*For officers and managers lower down in the organisation, it's given them a sense of purpose. They've actually got evidence now for what before was a feeling, they can say 'the peer review letter said we needed to work on this'.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

*The findings that were coming through from the review made things so much easier. I had identified these as problems [anyway] and needed to respond. It made that so much easier to do because it was coming out of the review and not just from the DCS.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

*[Peer reviewers] were able to voice and reiterate what I was wanting local agencies here to do, so it helped me drive forward as the chair of the safeguarding board, what I thought needed to be done.*

(Local authority interviewee)

The safeguarding peer review process is also helpful in bringing issues to the attention of senior leaders (both children's services professionals and elected members). As discussed in Chapter 6, this is particularly the case in relation to specific operational issues, or issues spanning the remit of more than one agency. In turn, this helps to facilitate change (including the commitment of resources) in the areas of weakness identified by the review team.

*[The recommendations of the peer review] were very helpful ... it meant that the Director of Children's Services had to take some action.*

(Peer interviewee)

*The very fact that you've had somebody else come in and look at things, and make some suggestions, means that the political pressure is there and the political will is there, and on the management side the will is there, to look at different ways of doing things which helps enable those changes to take place.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*The very fact that we've got somebody external saying this is strong, this is weak, here are some ideas, the very fact that you've gone through that exercise means that things have to change, things can't stand still.*

(Local authority interviewee)

## 4.2 Development of ideas, plans and actions

Peers come from a wide range of backgrounds and are considered to have a great deal of experience. As a result, local authority staff feel that they are able to benefit from the different views they offer, and value the opportunity to gain a wider local authority perspective from partner agency representatives and lead members. Interviewees comment on how peers bring ideas for new practice, make helpful suggestions

for how current work might be developed in the future and advise on areas that should be prioritised. The process of the peer review also enables staff to voice their ideas for improvement and seek feedback from the review team on the likelihood of success.

Following the review, senior staff in local authorities report that they met with colleagues locally to consider the feedback given by peers and the details of the peer review letter. They speak about the development of new plans and about amendments to existing policy documents (for example, to give particular areas greater priority), in the light of the recommendations of the review team. In many ways, the action planning session on the last day of the review provides local authorities with a starting point for this, but most interviewees indicate further work has subsequently been undertaken to develop initial ideas into concrete plans.

In one area, a particular issue highlighted by the review team was the general lack of awareness among staff at an operational level of the financial implications of the decisions they make. The local authority concerned is currently working on the development of a more consistent and transparent financial accountability culture.

*We've become much more focused on the types of actions and action planning and recording.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*The action planning meeting at the end of the review was highly successful in encouraging blue sky thinking.*

(Peer interviewee)

*The social care peer was able to come up with ideas, thoughts and suggestions and areas that they needed to look at, which I think really helped them to move forward.*

(Peer interviewee)

*We have taken forward the issues that were identified in the recommendations into our safeguarding business plan so we have mainstreamed them. It threw up a few things that we knew about anyway but it has made them a bit more strongly focused in terms of things that we need to improve on.*

(Local authority interviewee)

### 4.3 Promotion of learning and reflective practice

Those involved consider the safeguarding peer review to be a valuable learning opportunity. It provides local authority staff with the time and the opportunity for self-reflection, which can be scarce. Interviewees report that since the review, there is heightened awareness and dialogue among staff about safeguarding practice: 'The peer review was a starting point for discussion about effectiveness in delivering improved safe outcomes for children and young people' (Local authority interviewee).

In a small number of instances, staff from the review authorities make contact with peers following the review to learn more about safeguarding practices in other areas.

*The safeguarding board manager contacted me afterwards and I put her in touch with my manager because we were judged to be outstanding here so we were able to give them some bits of information and show them things that we had done to help them in their development – that's how you learn isn't it?*

(Peer interviewee)

*The benefit of having different peers from different parts of the country working on similar agendas certainly brings a unique perspective and brings exposure to different practices that they wouldn't have received before.*

(Peer interviewee)

*It was interesting hearing the learning from [the peers], hearing about how they manage things in their organisation.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*[The peer review process] gave the managers here a chance to talk together in a different way. It's a well-established management team, so it did give us an opportunity to reflect on issues ... it gave us a wider perspective.*

(Local authority interviewee)

### 4.4 Revision of policies, procedures and systems

Since the review, local authorities report that they have made changes to various policies and procedures as a result of recommendations made by the review team. In one area, this has included a rewrite of the preventions strategy. A local authority representative comments: 'The [peer review] team said that our prevention strategy was only descriptive. They gave us enough without being rude to tell us that it wasn't much cop.' In another area, the peer review has led to the creation of a formal supervision policy.

Work is also under way to develop systems which support the safeguarding agenda. In one area, the review team identified issues with serious case reviews and felt that the mechanism for referrals was unclear. Referring to this, a member of the local authority comments: 'We now have a streamlined process and we know who to contact.' Other changes to policies, processes and systems following the review include:

- wider service representation on the LSCB following feedback which suggests it might be too children's services focused
- developments to children's trust arrangements
- clarification for staff locally regarding the roles of the LSCB and the children's trust board
- improved joint auditing/inspection processes between the CAMHS and the local authority
- enhancements to monitoring procedures so that outcomes and impacts for young people could be more clearly evidenced
- improvements to strategic documents to ensure that there is clearer evidence of positive relationships between the local authority and schools.

### 4.5 Improvement in staff morale and relations

In each review, the team provides feedback on the local authority's strengths. These form part of the review findings and are shared with staff more widely by the local authority, to offer them some reassurance



(e.g. for forthcoming inspections) and improve staff morale. In several cases, interviewees report that, since the review, staff have developed increased confidence in themselves and their safeguarding practices as a result. This is evidenced in one area where peers identified that good monitoring systems and levels of accountability were in place, reassuring senior managers that operational staff could be appropriately afforded a greater degree of independence. A member of the authority comments that as a result of the peer review their approach to management of staff has changed: '[We learned] that we've got good staff, so we need to be confident and allow them a bit more capacity to grow and develop and make decisions.'

#### **4.6 Affirmation and enhancement of the quality of partnership working**

The peer review is said to be beneficial in highlighting where existing partnerships are effective. This gives confidence to local authorities and their partners that arrangements for joint working are strong in the area of safeguarding children. One peer comments, for example, that the peer review had 'confirmed and reaffirmed partnership working as strength'.

Bringing agencies together for the purpose of the review is also said to help heighten the debate about local safeguarding practice among partners and enhance their level of involvement in dialogue of this nature. This assurance of confidentiality allows all those involved in interviews with the peer review team to explore barriers to partnership working in a 'safe environment'. The feedback and action planning sessions in particular allow for open discussion about how issues can be resolved. One local authority interviewee said: 'It was a good test-bed to think, these are our issues jointly, we're going to approach solutions and ways forward in a joined-up way.' In some cases, interviewees report that this increased dialogue has been maintained after the review.

*I think the very process itself draws people in together. They all took the peer review very seriously, everybody we interviewed; it wasn't seen as 'why am I here?' by any of the agencies, they all contributed time and contributed to the timetable and that process in itself draws agencies together.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*We were able to say things and bring things out in the open which allowed partners to explore some of the more difficult issues in terms of multi-agency working.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*It provided a really good sounding board for all agencies to say what they wanted about the practices of working together and agency roles in the partnership world ... And once you start talking about things, you start talking about things which you probably wouldn't normally.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

Interviewees also report the benefit of having recommendations from an external review team about the need for partnership working. This feedback has subsequently been used as leverage by a local authority to persuade partners to work together.

*Because it's an external look at how we work together it gives weight and influence when going to other agencies to improve working arrangements.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

*It was good in terms of identifying areas where we could improve inter-agency working.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

*It [the feedback session] brought people from the PCT, the council and others together and it was like a big conversation – it was really helpful.*  
(Local authority interviewee)

Following the review, interviewees also describe the increased engagement and profile of partner agencies. For example, in one local authority, partnership attendance at multi-agency meetings has increased, and in another, health partners chair a greater number of meetings than they did previously. In other areas,

the review is felt to have had a modest impact on partnership working because relationships were already considered to be strong.

## 4.7 Impacts on peers

The benefits of the safeguarding children peer review also extend to peers, who often report that they gain a great deal from the experience personally and professionally. They describe how the peer review process, although quite demanding, is exceptionally rewarding.

Considered as a valuable professional development opportunity, benefits of the review for peers include the opportunity to spend time with senior and operational staff from a range of agencies (which they might not have the opportunity to do otherwise) and the development of new skills, including, for example, interviewing and feedback skills. Peers also describe the benefit of acquiring new ideas for practice from the local authorities they visited, which they could implement in their own organisations.

*It benefited my local authority because I came back much sharper. I came back and shared a lot of learning with the children's board that I chair– it certainly helped the chairing. It gets you out and you're looking at things with a fresh pair of eyes and that's a really valuable.*

(Peer interviewee)

*For me, it was really interesting [being] at another authority and seeing how they operate. I learnt some stuff and saw some practice there that I thought was really good practice. I took stuff away thinking I must have a think about how we might develop it. It was really good for me and the team felt similarly.*

(Peer interviewee)

Following their positive experience, many of the peers have made recommendations to colleagues about becoming a peer reviewer themselves. Although acknowledging that there is a considerable time commitment (see section 5.1), employers are generally very supportive of their staff being involved in LG Improvement and Development peer reviews and the majority of interviewees believe they will continue their role as a peer reviewer in the future.

## 5 Key benefits and challenges

This chapter explores the key benefits and challenges that interviewees consider to be of particular importance in shaping the success of a safeguarding children peer review. These can be categorised under four broad headings:

- the format and structure of the review process
- the composition of the peer review team, and the training of individual peers
- communication between peers and the local authority
- organisational and contextual factors relating to the host local authority.

### 5.1 Format and structure of the review process

The majority of interviewees report that the format and structure of the peer review are important influences in its success. This includes issues relating to the framework and methodology used for conducting the review, its breadth of focus, and the management and leadership of the LG Improvement and Development manager.

#### Review framework

Peers and local authority staff alike report that adherence to an established framework is helpful for review teams in evaluating local authority practice. The framework provided by LG Improvement and Development is considered to be a useful tool in enabling peers to strike the balance between consideration of specific issues in relation to safeguarding children, and constructive challenge for future good practice. The framework, if properly communicated to local authorities, is also considered to be of particular use in ensuring that local authorities and peers have shared expectations of the review process.

*It's important to have a properly structured process that has been well thought through so that you put some premium on to making sure that you do respond properly.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*The review is [conducted] against the framework and the signposts which are at the back of the manual so it is rigorous and robust. We explore specifics, but there are also the signposts to good practice that are quite challenging and aspirational. The reason we have that is for a benchmark in all of our reviews to work to. It is a robust framework. It is a good mechanism to ensure that we capture all of the issues but also that we are providing a rigorous and robust assessment.*

(Peer interviewee)

Whilst recognising the value of an established framework in general terms, several peers report that it can be challenging to map a local authority's particular strengths and weaknesses to the predefined lines of enquiry used to structure the review. As a result, peers from backgrounds other than children's services report that it is difficult to ensure that the voices of partner agencies are heard throughout the review process. Ensuring that these views are heard is important, both to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of safeguarding practice and to establish the peer review as a meaningful process for those partner agencies who have invested time into participating in the review. As noted by one peer: '[The review] became very local authority focused and I fully understand why, because they are the lead agency, but I felt it would have been a disservice to all the other agencies who had committed to be involved if we didn't include that feedback.'

Peers suggest that LG Improvement and Development may wish to refine these lines of enquiry in light of review teams' experiences. Work has already been undertaken to develop the framework to ensure that it is more appropriate to all services involved in safeguarding children, not just social care teams, and

that it has sufficient flexibility to be applied appropriately in a number of different contexts.

*We were trying to find evidence to fit into those categories [of the framework] where they didn't naturally fall, and other areas that I think should have been a higher priority.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*[Peers] probably have to have the confidence to use the framework but not be slavish about it as it can be a bit limited. We had the confidence... to amend it to suit us and the [local authority's] situation. I can see how we could have got stuck with it if we hadn't been more willing to do that.*  
(Peer interviewee)

One peer suggests that it may be useful to establish the role of peers from partner agencies, such as education and the voluntary sector, as a compulsory part of the review team, thereby adding weight and significance to the role of such agencies throughout the review process.

## Role of the review manager

Peers report that the leadership of a skilled review manager is highly important in ensuring the success of the review. In particular, peers value review managers' familiarity with the review methodology, as well as their role in coordinating, guiding and motivating the review team. Review managers' ability to manage the administrative aspects of the review is considered to be particularly important in ensuring that peers have the freedom to concentrate on using their subject-specific expertise.

The opportunity for the team to meet ahead of the review, and to spend time together in a social setting throughout the week, is viewed as an important opportunity for review managers to familiarise peers with the aims of the review, and to foster mutual trust and confidence within the review team. This aspect of the review process also allows review managers to learn about peers' own experiences and interests, and to gain a sense of the dynamics of the team. Review managers consider this to be important in helping them to allocate tasks appropriately, and to play to individuals' strengths and abilities.

Several peers also indicate that the leadership of the review manager is likely to be affected by their relationship with the peer review lead. In all cases, this was a positive relationship, and review managers and peers alike report that this shared sense of purpose is helpful in supporting the direction and focus of the review.

*It was a very positive, experienced team ... the [LGID manager's] team leadership skills were brilliant. He is very good at bringing the team together, making sure that people got time to get their thoughts and when they weren't interviewing to get back together.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*We [the LGID review manager and peer review lead] were able to offer a pretty good shared leadership role, and that relationship worked really well. There was a mutual trust and respect that really helped the team.*  
(Peer interviewee)

*[The review manager] took the coordination and business management aspect off the shoulders of the peer review team, so you were just there to use your professional expertise, and didn't have to worry about [the logistics].*  
(Peer interviewee)

## Breadth of the review

Peers across all five local authorities report that the broad scope of the review can be challenging, and that this has implications for the volume of work to be completed within the time available. According to peers, this makes it difficult both to reflect on issues as they arise, and to examine safeguarding practice at a very detailed level (for example, by reviewing individual case files, closely analysing safeguarding audit and monitoring procedures, and performance data) in the same way that formal inspections might.

Peers comment that it may be helpful for the review process to be redefined to allow for more detailed examination on particular themes or issues: this may extend to opportunities for peers to examine individual case files. The current review methodology specifies that case files should not be directly examined by

peers, in order to maintain the confidentiality of case records.

*The timetable was so tight that we were literally running from one thing to the other. I was finding that I had days when by the time we got back to our hotel it would be 7pm and you still wouldn't have had time to reflect on what you'd found out that day ... in terms of thinking, triangulating, trying to gain the best possible evidence, we perhaps need to build in a little bit more time.*

(Peer interviewee)

*It was very all consuming, a very hard, fast pace throughout the week. Trying to cover all the information was a huge challenge.*

(Peer interviewee)

*It was all so rushed, it would have been good to have a longer period to reflect with the team.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*We got a lot of information but it was varied ... we didn't get things like plans and up-to-date performance data.*

(Peer interviewee)

The breadth of the review is regarded as more of a challenge where peers are asked to form a view or give an opinion in areas outside of their core areas of expertise. Nonetheless, the opportunity for peers from different agencies to share learning and offer a new perspective is considered to be a key strength of the review process. A health peer comments: 'I was given all of the health interviews and focus groups to do, which I think is appropriate. At the same time, I think it is always useful for me to get to look at other services, and for other peer reviewers to look at health [safeguarding practice] as well.'

Interviewees also suggest that in order to alleviate pressure on the review team, it may be valuable to consider a greater level of involvement, and a slightly different role, for the off-site peer. In addition to the analysis conducted ahead of the review, interviewees report that it would be helpful to have a person dedicated to the analysis of new data as it emerges throughout the review, in order to test the validity of the review team's hypotheses on an ongoing basis. This would be helpful, both in helping other team members

to manage the number of interviews and discussions to be held throughout the review, and in encouraging reflection and discussion within the peer review team.

While one of the aims of the LG Improvement and Development peer review is to encourage learning and innovation in safeguarding, there were reports from local authority staff and peers alike that, although the review was certainly able to impact on learning, it was rather more difficult for the review team to influence innovative practice. There were two main reasons given for this. Firstly, interviewees conclude that the relatively short amount of time on site does not allow peers to explore and promote innovation. Similarly, the review methodology means that peers are mainly involved in interviews rather than discussions with staff, hence the opportunity to share and explore opportunities for innovation can be limited.

## 5.2 The peer review team

Interviewees identify a number of factors relating to the peer review team itself, and their individual characteristics, which are important in ensuring review success. These factors have two dimensions: the expertise and gravitas of peers, and their training and understanding of the review process.

### Expertise and gravitas of peers

As discussed in section 4.2, interviewees unanimously report that peer review teams were appropriately composed of skilled professionals, with a great deal of relevant experience relating to safeguarding children. The range of perspectives offered by peers from a diverse range of backgrounds, with varying levels of operational and strategic responsibility, is perceived as a key strength of the review process. Interviewees comment that this combined breadth of experience provides reviews with 'real richness of ideas and opinions', as well as enabling constructive challenge between individual peers on their assumptions and recommendations.

Reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of safeguarding practice, partner agency and voluntary sector representation on the review team is considered to be particularly important in offering a perspective which is distinct from those with a children's services

background. Some interviewees report that they would have welcomed greater representation on the review team from practice experts, voluntary sector peers, and peers from partner agencies such as the police.

*I thought [the composition of the review team] was excellent ... The group that we had was absolutely the right mix of skills and experience, and the breadth of that knowledge and experience and the range of exposure that people had had to different parts of the processes really made for a thorough review.*

(Peer interviewee)

*They gave us quite a wide range of feedback. The team was broad enough and experienced enough to give some reasonable feedback for the future.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*The peer review team was very knowledgeable. We weren't explaining to them what we were doing, they were able to come in and hit the ground running, and begin to look at our services.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*There is a value in having a review process that is done by people who are actually, in real time, doing the jobs themselves. We're in a very fast-moving environment, so when you're doing the job in a managerial way, then you have a real ownership of some of the challenges, and you can have a perspective that you might not if you were a consultant or somebody who is not currently engaged in the sector.*

(Peer interviewee)

*Because people recognised the backgrounds that they were coming from when they were giving very constructive remarks and very positive feedback, people were really taking it on board and it gave people affirmation that what they were doing was the right thing to do.*

(Local authority interviewee)

Both peers and local authority interviewees comment that the experience of the peer review team is considerably enhanced by the gravitas of a knowledgeable peer review lead. As the review lead is usually a director of children's services, their knowledge and gravitas is helpful in conveying the importance of

the review process to those involved. It can also be helpful in assuring local authorities of the value of the review team's recommendations, particularly when there are difficult questions to ask or unfavourable messages to communicate. However, it is noted by review managers that it can be difficult to recruit staff of this calibre to the review process as a result of competing demands upon their time. It is important, therefore, that opportunities for the further recruitment of peers and expansion of the peer database are explored to ensure that the ongoing involvement of senior peers is sustainable. Interviewees note similar issues in relation to health peers, indicating that strategies for the recruitment of peers are a wider issue.

## Training and understanding of peers

Both fellow reviewers and local authority staff perceive peers to be highly committed to their task. This commitment and a belief that the review process is worthwhile are essential to the success of the review. Without them, interviewees conclude it may not have been possible to complete the review to a high standard or within the allocated time.

*The peers seemed incredibly focused on their task, completely aware of what they were doing, they were clear with us about their roles, what they'd be doing, how they'd be working, which was really helpful because we had no idea how it was going to work.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*I really felt as though I was with people who were really, really on top of their game.*

(Peer interviewee)

However, both peers and local authority staff report that peer reviewers' understanding of the remit of the peer review team, and their individual roles within it, are in need of further development. In some cases, it is recognised that this is most likely because the programme is relatively new, and that this issue will naturally resolve itself as peers become more experienced and the review programme becomes further embedded.

*[The review lead] has got a great reputation for leading in [their local authority], and is a really, really powerful person and handled it in a wonderfully sensitive way. That was a really good experience to work at close quarters and see how this person operated.*

(Peer interviewee)

*[The review team] was well led. [The review lead's] leadership was excellent. That's what made the whole experience better.*

(Peer interviewee)

The training and accreditation programme for peers has evolved over the past two years and peers have received different levels of training as a result. Some peers comment that they would welcome further training and felt it would enhance their confidence to approach the peer review. For other peers, there was a time lag between the training and undertaking a review. In order to develop the programme in the future, LG Improvement and Development may wish to consider extending their training programme to meet the needs of those peers requiring additional support, and exploring means by which training can be delivered to peers so that it coincides more closely with the timing of the review.

*The issue for the peer review team was their experience in the role ... If people have only done this once or twice, getting into the right frame of mind which is somewhat different. If you are coming straight out of the local authority or an NHS setting, coming into a peer review with fairly limited preparation is quite hard. That comes with experience and reflective learning within the peer review team.*

(Local authority interviewee)

*As an associate, I hadn't been offered any specific peer training ... [Training] would have given me more confidence arriving on day one, but I like to think over a week it didn't make a great deal of difference.*

(Peer interviewee)

Some peer reviewers with primary responsibilities outside of children's social care occasionally struggled with their individual role within the review team. For example, one peer with specialist responsibilities reports that they had expected the local authority to

have particular concerns around safeguarding in their area of expertise because they had been specifically requested for the review. This appeared not to be the case, which left the peer concerned about whether they were fulfilling all of the expectations of their role: 'I couldn't find anything that wasn't good [relating to my area of expertise]... That was a little off-putting at first, and it also meant that as we got into the review, I felt I was more and more peripheral to the process because there wasn't anything for me to get my teeth into.' Providing greater clarity around the remit and expectation of peers with specialist responsibilities may help to alleviate these concerns in the future.

### 5.3 Communication between peers and the local authority

A key feature of the peer review programme is that the review team acts as a 'critical friend' to the local authority, rather than forming or delivering a judgement. Therefore, the ability of peer teams to perform, and be seen to perform, the review in this manner is critical to its success. Overall, the peer review teams engaged in this research appear to have been highly successful in this regard. Peers comment that local authority staff were highly complimentary about the style in which reviews were conducted, and were positive about the constructive nature of the recommendations made.

*[The local authority] fed back that they'd found it really helpful, and they were really positive about it.*

(Peer interviewee)

*It was very well received because you work on a no-surprises basis, so that on each day there is a meeting with the local authority so we are feeding back the sort of messages that are coming through. At the end, what is fed back to the local authority isn't a shock or a surprise, because there has been some indication of what's coming across during the week.*

(Peer interviewee)

*[The peers] made it absolutely clear that this wasn't an inspection, and they made that clear from the very outset and at the end. I don't think anybody had the feeling that it was an inspection ... although they did make it clear that if they found something that was so serious they couldn't leave it that they would have to do that, but they didn't [find anything].*

(Local authority interviewee)

*As a team we were really clear in every interview, in every interface, ... and in the way we conducted ourselves, we were very much reassuring and reaffirming of our position [as a critical friend].*

(Peer interviewee)

However, some peer review teams experienced challenges in delivering difficult messages to local authorities, who found such recommendations hard to accept. In most cases, this was because local authorities and their partners were surprised by the content of peers' recommendations. Peers comment that the dynamic of the relationship between the review team and the local authority (i.e. where the local authority is perceived as a client), means that they sometimes do not expect to receive recommendations which extend beyond their specified areas of focus. Communication about the purpose of the review, and the recommendations arising from it, is therefore highly important. However, in some cases, despite the best efforts of the review manager and team to communicate effectively, there were instances where peers perceived that local authorities had not fully considered the implications of involvement in an external review of this nature.

*At times I think [the council] felt that we'd gone beyond our remit. My argument would be that if you have an inspection they can go anywhere they like and you can't say you've gone outside of your remit.*

(Peer interviewee)

*In the main [we perceived the review team as a] critical friend, although there were some uncomfortable moments. There were some comments which we felt were unhelpful and possibly not well thought through. Some of that comes down to experience, to their perceptions from their particular point of view.*

(Local authority interviewee)

Some interviewees also questioned whether the feedback session at the end of the week is the most appropriate forum for feeding back messages.

Given the peer review's ethos of a commitment to learning rather than attributing blame, it can be difficult for peers to deliver messages that focus on individual groups or particular agencies in a setting such as this. It can also be difficult to provide more detail to local authorities about specific causes underpinning their recommendations or more detail generally because peers are conscious of the need to protect the confidential nature of the consultations they hold during the review process. Key learning arising from this is that it may be valuable for LG Improvement and Development to explore ways of gaining consent to provide more detail in response to specific requests for information.

## 5.4 Organisational and contextual factors

Interviewees from all peer review teams report that a local authority's commitment to the peer review process, as well as their openness and willingness to engage constructively with peers, is important in determining the success of the review. A peer comments: 'They were very receptive, open and willing participants so the learning that we offered was particularly well received.'

### Organisation and understanding of the review process

A local authority's planning and preparation for the review process is widely held to be a critical factor in determining the success of the review. This extends to the local authority's role in completing self-assessment questionnaires, conducting the case-mapping exercise, preparing material for peers to consider ahead of the review, and in ensuring commitment to the review across all local authority staff and partner agencies. This includes the need to ensure staff understand that the purpose of the review is to explore weaknesses and shortcomings as well as to celebrate areas of strength and therefore that they can give open feedback to peers within the parameters of the review.



Across all five local authorities, peers comment that this was a highly successful aspect of the review process. The majority of peers indicate that each local authority had worked effectively with the peer review lead and LG Improvement and Development review manager to organise and plan review activities. Each local authority had ensured that staff were aware of, and in support of, the aims of the review. This is particularly useful to the review team when it extends to partner agencies, as their involvement in the review process is recognised as a particular challenge for the review process due to the varying performance indicators and service requirements of different agencies.

*People managed the process and they were always there and we could ask for other people and more information. It is about the council being up for it and identifying resources to make it happen. Staff had been briefed and were willing to be honest and say how it was.*  
(Peer interviewee)

A challenge, however, is ensuring that local authority staff have clear expectations about the detail of their likely involvement in discussions with the peer review team. Some peers feel that local authority staff had initial misgivings about the review team's motives, and were surprised by the level of detail at which they were questioned. Peers feel that this may have had an impact on the willingness of local authority staff to be open and honest, although it was felt that this concern was generally alleviated throughout the week. This indicates that there are some lessons to be learned about ensuring all local authority staff and their partners, rather than just those involved in planning and preparing for the review, are made aware of expectations in terms of the purpose and format of the review, and are briefed about the level of detail of questioning at the outset.

## Coordination and timing of the review

Some interviewees report that there are organisational issues associated with the specific context of individual local authorities. For example, in one local authority with a relatively large geographical spread, peers experienced difficulties in getting to appointments on many different sites. However, in another local authority peers report that there would have been ample time to complete the review in fewer than five days. Therefore, consideration may need to be given to the specific context of each local authority in planning and scheduling of review activities.

Peers report that other challenges are also imposed by local circumstances, such as particular members of staff being unavailable for interview. This is considered to be particularly problematic when issues arise during the week, which mean it would be helpful to speak to an individual who is not timetabled into the process: there is rarely flexibility in the timetable to accommodate this.

LG Improvement and Development has offered local authorities the option for follow-up contact (post-review) to provide them with the option for further support from the review manager and/or other peers. However, this offer has rarely been taken up. In some cases, local authorities appear unaware that such support is available. Some authorities have experienced difficulties in developing the recommendations of the review team work post-review and others have had insufficient time to follow up on any progress made. In such instances it may be that some external follow-up on targets and milestones would be helpful. For peers, because there is no further contact with the authorities, they are unaware of how their recommendations have been taken forward and if the review has informed local changes in practice. Therefore, LG Improvement and Development may wish to explore further ways to build some follow-up contact into the standard review procedure, and develop ways to encourage authorities to engage in this process, in order to maximise benefits from the programme.

## 6 Learning and recommendations for LG Improvement and Development and the sector

This concluding chapter addresses the key lessons and learning for LG Improvement and Development and the sector that have emerged throughout this study.

The findings of this research clearly indicate that the safeguarding children peer review process can be highly valuable to local authorities, supporting their upwards performance trajectory of safeguarding practice. However, whilst a considerable amount of value has already been derived from the peer review programme to date, the findings indicate there is also considerable capacity for future development and expansion of the programme as it becomes further embedded and refined.

The findings of this study complement and reinforce those of previous research drawing out early lessons from the peer review process (Pettigrew and Schroeder, 2010), serving to expand and consolidate the evidence base with feedback from a greater range and number of interviewees. Given the high degree of harmonisation between these two studies, the findings of this research are well positioned to offer valuable and robust feedback to LG Improvement and Development and the sector on the future development of the programme.

### Suggestions on areas for future development of the programme

- In the current financial climate, it may be increasingly difficult for local authorities to agree to release staff to undertake the role of a peer reviewer. LG Improvement and Development may wish to explore opportunities for the further recruitment of peers and expansion of the peer database to ensure that the ongoing involvement of senior peers is sustainable. LG Improvement and Development could also consider further research to explore the impacts of the safeguarding peer review process (to capture more medium- and longer-term impacts than

this study allowed), so that the benefits of engaging in the review can be promoted more widely. Other incentives or more formal arrangements for the secondment of staff could also be usefully explored.

- The safeguarding children peer review programme has the potential to serve a wider purpose as a self-assessment tool, supporting mutual learning and improvement between local authorities. The review programme could be developed on a quid pro quo basis under the auspices of peers' own professional development. Peer review teams could provide reciprocal review services with other local authorities, which would enable them to share their expertise as well as inform their own learning.
- There is potential for the review process to be tailored more closely to the requirements of the commissioning local authority. LG Improvement and Development may want to consider offering local authorities a staged approach to the safeguarding children peer review, the first stage being the opportunity to engage in a 'scoping peer review', a much shorter exercise that is more general and wide ranging. A local authority that took this option may benefit from the opportunity to develop further the scoping recommendations in a more detailed in-depth review. Alternatively, a local authority with a clear sense of where they wish to focus their resources could opt for an in-depth review from the outset.
- LG Improvement and Development may wish to explore further ways to build some follow-up contact into the standard review procedure, and develop ways to encourage authorities to engage in this process in order to maximise the benefits of the programme. Follow-up contact would provide a useful milestone (at three-, six- and 12-month intervals, for example), for local authorities and give further impetus to

develop areas of weakness identified by the review team. Such follow-up contact would also enable LG Improvement and Development to collect data on how the review has been able to impact on safeguarding locally, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the programme.

- There is potential for greater feedback to be given to peers following their involvement in a review, both in terms of the local authority's comments on the review process and details of their progress in relation to recommendations made by the review team. Similarly, the format of the review may also be usefully developed so that targets and action planning arising from the review can be effectively fed back more widely to local authority staff.

- LG Improvement and Development and the sector may wish to explore further ways of maximising multi-agency involvement in the planning and delivery of the safeguarding peer review programme, both in terms of representation on the peer team and the involvement of a wider range of agencies in interviews and feedback sessions within the host local authority. In addition to the benefits this would bring to the review, there is considerable potential for such engagement to bring about the relationships necessary for ongoing partnership working and to encourage a holistic, joined-up approach to safeguarding children.

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# 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/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/)



## Hidden talents: exploiting the link between engagement of young people and the economy

This report identifies a range of opportunities for local authorities and businesses to work together for mutual benefit. It provides case studies showing how local authorities can create links between their work to engage young people, economic development and business support, in order to achieve improved outcomes for young people and employers.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/HITA01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/HITA01/)



## Safeguarding children: literature review

Building on the work and recommendations of the scoping study, and with the aim of supporting improvement in the sector, this new literature review distilled current learning and key messages around the levers and challenges for safeguarding practice post-Laming. The findings suggest developments across a wide spectrum of practice

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/LSGL01>



## Implementing outcomes based accountability in children's services: an overview of the process and impact

NFER was commissioned to identify the impact of the OBA approach on LA practice in children's services through nine case studies (18 interviews with strategic and operational staff). The main findings are presented in a thematic report with further details as case studies.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/OBA02/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/OBA02/)

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The safeguarding children peer review programme, led by Local Government (LG) Improvement and Development, supports councils in identifying areas for improvement in local safeguarding services for children and young people. The Local Government Group commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an independent study to draw out key messages and learning from the programme.

Looking at reflections and developments in five local authorities that underwent the peer review process, this report covers:

- the impacts of a safeguarding peer review
- key benefits and challenges
- organisational and contextual factors
- learning and recommendations for the sector.

It is important reading for those commissioning, managing or delivering safeguarding services in local authorities and their partner agencies, and for colleagues at LG Improvement and Development.