

Joining the dots...

Effective leadership of children's services

This good practice report explores the ways in which successful leadership in children's services leads to better practice and improves the lives of children and families.

It draws on evidence from visits to nine local authorities in which Her Majesty's Inspectors identified the common characteristics of successful leaders in children's services.

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Executive summary

The importance of effective leadership in local authorities' children's services cannot be underestimated.

Leadership style was found to be a critical feature in the local authorities visited. Although not all leaders possessed the same qualities, the style in which they engaged their staff, partners and local community was central to their success in driving change and improvement. Their approach was open, honest and collaborative. They were driven by a strong moral base informed by solid professional knowledge.

These successful leaders modelled expected behaviour and set clear expectations for staff. They were credible and highly visible, and inspired staff to perform well. They set high standards for workers and developed a culture which was supportive and challenging while acknowledging risk and the need for clear accountabilities. Staff in these places trusted directors and were loyal to the service.

In order to ensure that children and young people benefited from safe and effective social work, leaders had introduced effective lines of accountability. This reduced risk and improved decision making in complex cases. They got to know the cases well and understood how services were meeting the needs of children and families. They scrutinised a range of 'soft' and 'hard' data and established a deep understanding of practice.

Senior managers took decisive action when necessary and staff trusted their ability to do what was right for children. They encouraged creativity while ensuring that there was consistency of approach. Leaders supported the development of reflective supervision, and provided challenge in a constructive and structured way. This increased confidence among the workforce that good decisions were being made which were improving outcomes for children and families.

Many authorities continued to face challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled and competent workforce. Leaders in the local authorities visited were developing innovative ways of overcoming this including robust succession planning, 'growing their own', placing a high importance on learning and development and protecting budgets and caseloads.

Most staff were inspired by leaders to perform well. This was achieved through being clear about expected standards, leading by example, and continually monitoring performance data and other information. Leaders developed structures to scrutinise performance at different levels so that they had a comprehensive understanding of what the data was telling them. They had confidence in the data and used it to facilitate further improvements. They fed back information about performance to staff and managers so that they could learn from each other as well as from national reviews and research.

Management structures varied between authorities, depending on size, geography and history. However, they shared a common theme, which was clarity of roles, accountabilities and responsibilities. Chief executives described their role as supportive with appropriate challenge, fostering the right environment for the director and senior management team to undertake their roles successfully.

Elected members provided political support, explaining policy and practice intent to other politicians and leading debates about frontline practice where necessary for improvement. Directors kept a firm 'grip' on the front line. This was underpinned by the use of data, feedback, intelligence and a balance of styles between leaders.

Leaders proactively sought feedback from a variety of sources and were seen to act in response, engendering trust among their staff and partner agencies. They took time to build and maintain relationships with staff and partners, encouraging them to understand the benefits of a collaborative approach.

Key findings

- Leaders, including the Director of Children’s Services (DCS), chief executive and lead member, used a variety of methods to ensure they had a firm ‘grip’ on frontline practice. This meant that they had a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their workforce and the needs and quality of the services being provided.
- Leaders were passionate about children and young people and knowledgeable about services, and worked collaboratively with staff to facilitate improvements. They retained a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and their families.
- Clear responsibility and accountability for directors, senior managers and partners characterised good leadership in strongly performing authorities. Structure mattered less in these places.
- Improvement took time, and directors invested heavily in building and maintaining key relationships – with other leaders, with partners and with staff. They developed a compelling vision to lead improvement.
- Senior leaders worked from a strong moral base and modelled the behaviour they expected from their staff. This was mirrored throughout the service by middle and team managers to frontline staff.
- Senior leaders had high expectations of their staff’s performance. Staff felt valued and invested in because their learning and development was prioritised and senior leaders took an active interest in their work. They were proud to work for the authority, felt committed and wanted to stay.
- Senior leaders proactively and regularly sought and listened to the views of families, children, staff and partner agencies. They encouraged creativity and innovation in implementing changes as a result of feedback.

Background

1. In 2014 Ofsted introduced a new inspection framework of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.¹ In an initial evaluation of findings from the first 11 local authorities that had been inspected against this framework, inspectors identified common leadership characteristics in the 'good' authorities.
 - The senior leadership investment in the professional environment enabled social work to flourish.
 - Senior leaders were monitoring workloads closely and management oversight focused on the quality of work as well as the volume.
 - Leaders kept staffing vacancies under close review. They used their local knowledge and employed effective strategies to help them retain and attract new staff.
 - Supervision and training were effective in retaining and developing staff.
 - Managers understood and managed caseloads. They knew the children and care plans well.
 - Principal social workers positively influenced practice and provided the professional voice in senior management teams.
2. This good practice thematic inspection explored these findings in more detail, to understand how successful leaders created and maintained these conditions to build a strong and effective workforce.
3. In 2010, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services and C4EO undertook research with eight local authorities and 22 DCSs to identify and highlight the qualities of a 'resourceful' leader within children's social care.² The research set out the eight core behaviours it found to be the hallmarks of resourceful leaders. It identified three specific contexts to consider: leading change, leading in a time of change and managing the corporate and political landscape.
4. **The eight core behaviours** identified in the research were underpinned by a range of knowledge areas, skills and attributes. The behaviours identified align with and build on the National Leadership Qualities Framework.³

¹ *Inspecting local authority children's services: the framework*, Ofsted, 2014;

www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-framework.

² *Resourceful leadership: how directors of children's services improve outcomes for children*, National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services and C4EO, 2011.

³ *National Leadership Qualities Framework for Directors and Senior Leaders of Children's Services*, The Virtual Staff College, October 2011.

5. The eight core behaviours were:
 - openness to possibilities
 - the ability to collaborate
 - demonstrating a belief in their team and people
 - personal resilience and tenacity
 - the ability to create and sustain commitment across a system
 - focusing on results and outcomes
 - the ability to simplify
 - the ability to learn continuously.
6. The research found that all directors display these behaviours to some extent and the most effective differentiate themselves in two particular ways. They are able to select the right set of behaviours for a given challenge and, most importantly, know why the behaviours they select would be most effective.
7. Findings from Ofsted's initial evaluation and from the resourceful leadership report informed the methodology and line of questioning for this good practice thematic inspection.

Methodology

8. The fieldwork for this good practice thematic inspection took place during August 2014. Inspectors visited nine local authorities representing a variety of types and sizes of authority. The authorities were selected based on their inspection judgement history and improvements they had made. Some had been consistently good for a number of years. Others were on the beginning of their improvement journey, having recently improved from 'inadequate' to 'requires improvement' or from 'requires improvement' to 'good'.
9. In each local authority inspectors tracked up to six cases which were pre-selected by the local authority. Overall, inspectors considered 51 cases and spoke to 22 parents and carers and seven young people who were the subjects of the tracked cases.
10. In all local authorities structured interviews were held with:
 - Director of Children's Services
 - Local Safeguarding Children Board chair
 - lead member for children's services
 - chief executive
 - senior managers from health and police services.

11. Small group meetings were held with:
 - heads of service (middle managers)
 - managers from partner agencies
 - team managers
 - social workers
 - professionals from other agencies.
12. Telephone calls or meetings were held with:
 - seven young people
 - 22 parents/carers.

Introduction

13. The age range of the children involved in the 51 cases varied from a few weeks old to 18 years, with the spread as follows:

■ Less than one year	18%
■ 1–3 years	14%
■ 4–10 years	24%
■ 11–16 years	32%
■ 17–18 years	12%.
14. Most of the cases tracked were highly complex cases where the local authority had to carefully balance risk. Sixty four per cent of the children and young people involved were looked-after children. Many cases featured parental behaviours that are known to be indicators of risk, including domestic violence (36%), neglect (30%), substance misuse (26%) or mental ill health (18%). Thirty per cent of cases demonstrated at least two of these features in combination and 14% demonstrated at least three of these features. Twenty two per cent of the children and young people had a disability or special educational need.
15. The title of the individual who had responsibility for children’s social care in each local authority varied. For simplicity this report refers to them all as director of children’s services (DCS), which reflects their statutory responsibilities as set out in the Children Act 2004.

Leadership style

16. Leadership style was a critical feature in the local authorities visited. Not all individuals possessed the same qualities but the leadership teams in all the authorities shared a common set of complementary talents and behaviours. The

style in which they engaged their workforce, partners and communities was the key element in driving improvements.

17. Leaders were open, honest, collaborative, knowledgeable and driven by a strong moral base. They modelled expected behaviour, set clear expectations for staff, were credible and highly visible, and inspired staff to perform well. They set high standards for workers and developed a culture that was enabling yet challenging, and supported workers to achieve those standards. As one social worker said:

‘They created an energy in the workforce.’

18. On many occasions workers told inspectors that their leaders were motivational and inspirational. They led by example, encouraging staff to perform to the best of their ability. One head of service stated:

‘The behaviour of senior leaders inspires me to do better.’

19. An effective and strong leadership style was necessary to develop a clear vision for the improvement agenda. This was a particular challenge for leaders who had stepped into poorly performing authorities. Staff were often unmotivated, and felt deskilled and undervalued. One DCS explained:

‘You have to deliver a compelling narrative that brings people together and sets ambitions.’

20. Developing such a narrative was an obvious challenge for leaders. It needed to be a narrative that included staff at all levels, that allowed them to see where things had gone wrong and that placed them at the centre of improvement. It also required a focus on performance and expectations without blaming them for the overall poor rating. It needed to inspire, to encourage, and to set realistic expectations for improvement. One chief executive stated:

‘The key to leading is to remember that people can do outstanding things. It’s the art of knowing that nothing is impossible and getting everyone else to believe it too.’

21. Leaders realised that improvement took time. They invested heavily in time and resources to develop the culture necessary for improvement. One DCS explained:

‘Leaders must motivate others to make a profound difference to children’s lives, creating a climate of shared values and common purpose. This is essential before you get to targets and performance measures.’

22. Leaders, especially DCSs, spent time building and maintaining relationships with staff. This was a particular challenge in authorities where performance and standards had been poor. A change in culture took carefully orchestrated investment. A head of service in one authority stated:

'The DCS worked hard to create a 'can-do' culture of shared values and shared responsibilities.'

23. Leaders in Staffordshire embarked upon such a change programme:

Staffordshire County Council – changing the culture

In 2010 children's services in Staffordshire were fragmented. Resources were focused on traditional structural and political boundaries and staff morale was low with limited confidence in the leadership of change. The vision of the council leadership, chief executive, lead member and the DCS was to achieve an outcome-focused quality service based on the child's journey. Families First was set up in September 2011 with a remit to integrate services and align them with the child's pathway, both internally and with partners.

The Organisational Development (OD) service was tasked with supporting the Families First leadership team to achieve the vision and embed the new culture. An in-depth diagnostic was undertaken, which led to a planned and systematic approach and investment in the development of leadership to drive the process.

Leaders took a number of steps to embed the change in culture, including:

- engaging the entire workforce in developing the vision, values and expected behaviour
- establishing district delivery and engagement groups to drive innovation and partnership working
- running business and development-focused leadership meetings and regular service performance reviews with the wider leadership team to demonstrate trust in the devolved leadership model
- back-to-the-floor visits by the senior leadership team
- developing a set of two-way communication methods with workers, both face-to-face and written, with timely responses to queries to demonstrate a commitment to the workforce, and to recognise their value
- strategic planning of the learning and development offer across the service.

As well as saving money and improving performance, this approach increased confidence in change management.

The head of Families First stated: 'We are still on the road to improvement. The challenges are as great, if not greater, with more demand and less resource. Organisational Development are continuing to support us, including:

- further work on culture definition
- a structured approach to organisation design
- to broaden and deepen the leadership programme to provide more business focus and lead change
- innovation and peer challenge
- a workforce capability programme.

We continue to use quality data from a range of sources to monitor success and to continuously improve.'

24. A key element of an effective improvement agenda was clarity around expectations and roles. This enabled staff to understand their role in improvement and set out how they were expected to perform. The example below details how the Royal Borough of Greenwich ensured that staff were clear about what they were expected to do.

Royal Borough of Greenwich – developing clear expectations

Several factors have been key to developing clear expectations in Greenwich:

- Senior managers communicating (both face-to-face and in writing) about priorities and expectations. They communicated key messages through a robust meeting cycle, which allowed for dialogue up, down and through the organisation. Senior leaders were clear about organisational purpose and goals, which helped ensure that messages were consistent.
- Managers and staff discussed the Children and Young People's Plan and the three themed improvement plans relating to safeguarding, corporate parenting and workforce development during appraisals. These plans informed each staff member's personal development plan.
- The workforce development strategy, while identifying the organisational support available to support good practice, equally emphasised the responsibility of individuals for their own learning and contributing to the learning of others.
- Less experienced practitioners were supported by professional educators and the professional lead for disabled children. These post holders promoted and enhanced reflective and child-centred practice through coaching and modelling.

As a result, all staff across the children's partnership understand the common goal of improving outcomes for children and young people through collaborative achievement.

25. Leaders were visible and knowledgeable. Staff had confidence in their leaders' ability and were positive about their style and their commitment. Many senior leaders were described as passionate. Their top priority was children and young people. One chief executive stated:

'We want the best possible outcomes for all children – absolutely the best. We don't just want to be a strong good; we want to be outstanding.'

26. Showing an interest in staff and their work engendered trust and commitment among staff. A social worker told inspectors:

'Senior managers here set a fantastic example.'

27. Leaders got to know social workers and the children they worked with. One social worker said:

'The DCS knows my name and the cases that I work with.'

28. Another worker said that when senior managers had been involved in case decisions, they continued to be interested in what was happening with the case. She said:

'The DCS came and sat with me for half an hour to discuss the case with me.'

29. Leaders spent time listening to workers and appreciating their concerns, as well as understanding the nuances of individual cases. One DCS told inspectors:

'I tell them that I am interested in what they do, and then I show them that I am.'

30. A striking feature of the leadership style was openness. Staff felt involved and included. They saw their managers and leaders as approachable. The DCS and other senior leaders instilled this culture by, for example:

- ensuring that feedback was acted on
- genuinely involving people in developments
- consulting at an early stage.

31. In more than one authority, staff told inspectors that there had been a recent shift – consultations with staff had changed from 'going through the motions' to a genuine desire for opinions. The process was now open and transparent and the rationale for decisions, even unpopular ones, was understood.

32. To achieve this change, the leadership teams had acted on what they heard. This had often started with small things. In one authority, social workers had said that a particular process was cumbersome and paperwork-heavy. Leaders acted quickly to alter the process and included staff in developing the new process. Because they were seen to act, workers gradually built up confidence

in senior leaders, trusting that they would listen to them and they felt able to voice their concerns. One chief executive told us:

‘Every member of staff knows they can talk to the DCS.’

33. Several local authorities visited had established a collaborative leadership approach. This led to ownership of improvement plans across the organisation. In several authorities task and finish groups involved people throughout the organisation on an equal footing. These could be chaired by a senior manager, middle manager or social worker depending on the needs of the plan and the skill mix of the group. In the example below, the Royal Borough of Greenwich developed an approach that distributed responsibility for leading throughout the organisation.

Royal Borough of Greenwich – distributive leadership

The approach to leadership in the Royal Borough of Greenwich places value on staff and the contribution they make. This is not only in terms of their day-to-day practice but in terms of how they contribute to improving the service. The approach recognises that professional leadership comes from all levels of the local authority’s children’s services and from its partnerships. It is a distributive and devolved model that defines responsibilities and accountabilities. It also fosters a culture of empowerment and ownership; of ‘being part of the doing’ as opposed to ‘be being done to’.

During the last organisational change middle managers were re-designated as ‘leaders’. This reinforced the shift in culture from management, which emphasised compliance and task completion, to leadership, with a new emphasis on learning and improvement. Task and finish groups promoted service improvement and were formed of a ‘diagonal slice’ through the organisation, involving staff from all levels. Practitioners were routinely involved in these groups and also took on other leadership roles, such as leading workshops. This was balanced with caseload demands.

An improvement board, also including junior and senior staff, supports critical enquiry and ensures that the impact of service improvement is evaluated and disseminated.

The aim of this leadership model is to share influence and responsibility for the quality of services and continuous improvements in outcomes for children. It builds capacity for professional leadership and demonstrates confidence and trust in the workforce. Practitioners clearly feel valued and that they are part of something valuable.

34. Senior leaders operated from a strong value base and had a sense of moral purpose, which drove their behaviour and the expectations of the workforce. This underpinned all that they did and set the climate for improvement. One DCS stated:

‘You can have all the best strategies and systems but first and foremost a good leader has to have a strong moral base – a sense of moral purpose.’

35. Leaders used this to model the behaviour that they wanted from their staff. This ensured that staff felt safe and able to contribute to debates and discussions. One DCS explained:

‘People have a clear idea of how you will behave because this is value based – it leads to people feeling safe because they know the rules.’

36. As one chief executive explained:

‘People see you behaving as you expect them to behave.’

37. Modelling the behaviour expected from staff was a powerful way of ensuring that staff were carried along with the overall vision. The feedback from staff about senior leaders was overwhelmingly positive. Leaders enabled, involved and enthused their workforce to strive for better and better performance. One social worker said of her leaders:

‘They set a fantastic example.’

38. Leaders in these authorities did not become complacent. They understood that, despite ongoing improvements, they needed to ensure that they kept doing the basics well. One DCS explained:

‘We focus on the core business – doing the basics right every time to a good standard.’

39. They were committed to continual improvement. They used feedback, intelligence, data, recommendations from inspection reports, peer reviews and other information to drive further improvements. A chief executive put it succinctly:

‘We are climbing a mountain. We are halfway up but there’s a long way to go.’

How successful senior leaders oversee safe and effective professional practice

40. Leaders introduced clear accountability to ensure that children and young people benefited from safe and effective social work. This included panels and forums for ensuring that risk assessment and decision making in complex cases

were shared. The leaders knew the cases well and understood how well services were meeting the needs of families.

41. Senior managers took decisive action when necessary and staff trusted their ability to do what was right for children. They encouraged creativity, while ensuring that there were consistent approaches. Leaders supported a model of reflective supervision and provided challenge in a supportive and structured way. This promoted confidence that good decisions were being made throughout the organisation, which were improving outcomes for children and families.
42. All authorities had introduced decision-making structures to ensure that, where appropriate, decisions were overseen by a middle or senior manager. These enabled a frank discussion and social workers told inspectors that, as a result, they understood the rationale for decisions and what they needed to do to progress cases. Some authorities had introduced less formal approaches alongside the panels and forums, such as a 'Friday afternoon drop-in' where social workers could discuss aspects of cases with service managers. The example below explains one local process for dealing with complex and challenging cases.

Hampshire County Council – multi-agency complex case resolution meeting (MACCRM)

Hampshire children's services recognised that frontline staff were often getting 'stuck' with cases of children and young people who had complex needs. Senior leaders decided that it was essential that they shared the risk and accountability for these children and young people with case holders, intervened when appropriate, secured an agreed way forward and offered a firm management 'grip' within the multi-agency partnership.

They established the monthly multi-agency complex case resolution meeting (MACCRM) to provide an opportunity for cases to be given appropriate senior management oversight so that information is shared and decisions made clearly.

The MACCRM considers:

- all children placed in residential care
- children exiting a secure environment
- children for whom there is no identifiable resource
- children with complex needs at risk of drifting
- children in custody
- children where there is professional disagreement that cannot be resolved locally.

As a result of these meetings, workers have developed confidence to manage and understand risk that is shared at a senior level.

43. Social workers said they were surprised at how well senior managers remembered their cases. Many senior managers proactively sought out workers to ask about cases. Managers also went out on visits and heard back from team managers about frontline visits they had undertaken. They got involved in case discussions and went and sat with workers to discuss cases. The example below details how managers in Kensington and Chelsea ensured they kept a focus on practice.

Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea – practice week

Twice a year the family services leadership team undertakes 'practice week'. During this week the team audits up to 80 cases, undertakes 20 observations and speaks to 25 families independently of the practitioner.

The case audits and observations are undertaken alongside the social worker or practitioner. The intention of the week is to quality assure the work as well as to influence practice by considering decisions, case direction, work undertaken and case recording. The leadership team provided comments and written feedback to practitioners at the time of the audit or observation to encourage learning.

A report of both quantitative and qualitative information brought together the key findings. The report is written with the aim of exploring systemic difficulties, highlighting themes and identifying specific actions to be taken. The week is popular with managers and frontline staff who appreciate an opportunity to demonstrate good practice and to ensure that senior managers have a good understanding of the day-to-day pressures of the job.

44. An important element in improving practice was getting the balance right between workers having ownership of cases and knowing when a manager needed to step in. One chair of a Local Safeguarding Children Board said:
- 'It's about giving strong direction without directing all the time.'
45. When leaders achieved this balance it enabled social workers and other practitioners to flourish and to grow in confidence. They had trust that senior managers would step in if necessary, but felt that the process was a collaborative one. There was a sense of collective responsibility, a willingness to learn and to work together to put things right. A practitioner in a partner agency explained:
- 'Managers enter into a dialogue with you, they don't simply direct you to do something different.'
46. Leaders were also willing to learn alongside workers to ensure good outcomes. One case, which highlighted this culture of collaboration, involved an adoption placement within a foreign country – an unusual situation, which none of the senior managers had dealt with before. It was described as 'a steep learning

curve for all involved'. Senior managers stepped in to guide and ensure that the correct processes were followed. As a result the social worker felt there had been a joint effort to secure the best outcomes for the young child involved.

47. There were many examples of effective decision making by senior managers in the cases seen by inspectors. In one case managers had supported a social worker who had been threatened by a parent. The social worker told inspectors:

'Managers have been active throughout this case, most importantly in undertaking visits to support me when I was constantly subjected to threats. Extensive measures have been put in place to ensure that I am safe.'

48. Effective recording and oversight had ensured consistency between the decisions made in the case. When the emergency duty team became involved, they were able to take decisive measures to safeguard the child. Managers took prompt action to follow up on the slow response by other agencies. The result was a positive outcome for the child with effective plans in place for a permanent home with an adoptive family.

49. Successful leaders supported staff through a combination of effective challenge, appropriate involvement and modelling of behaviour. This led to work that was safe, effective and provided without delay. Staff mirrored the behaviour of their senior managers in their work with families, leading to an overall appreciation by families of the help they were receiving. The majority of the cases seen by inspectors involved either child protection procedures or removing a child from their family. Yet a very high number of parents and children spoken to expressed a positive attitude to the intervention. One parent of a looked-after child told inspectors:

'It was difficult at first because we got to know the social worker through a child protection process. As time went on we felt more listened to and felt she was working with us. She always explained things to us and made sure we understood what was happening and why.'

It was inevitable that [our child] would have to be placed in care and though it is hard, we know he has a good family home now and he will keep our relationship with us.

The local authority has never given up on him. The social worker's manager came and visited us and this helped us to realise what was right for [our child].'

50. The culture of openness, honesty and safety created an environment that enabled leaders to develop a solution-focused environment. One case involved a teenage girl whose risky and disruptive behaviour placed her in danger of sexual exploitation. Managers, including the DCS, were involved in discussions about moving the young person away from the local authority. Taking account

of all the risks and the concerns expressed by partner agencies, the DCS decided to keep the young person closer to home in accordance with her wishes. Extensive support, reflection and challenge were evidenced to help the social worker, especially during periods of higher risk.

51. This support enabled the social worker to work more authoritatively with the young person and partner agencies. Managers intervened directly to address partner concerns, which gave the social worker confidence that decisions were shared. As a result of this collaborative, supportive way of working, the level of concern for this young person was reduced and she was assessed at a lower risk of child sexual exploitation. She has recently chaired her looked-after child review and attended some of her placement planning meetings, allowing managers to hear her views directly. The assured nature of the managers and shared responsibility in decision making added to the feeling of safety among workers. One social worker stated:

‘Leaders here are calm and safe, which gives us confidence when they are making big decisions.’

52. This culture extended to partner agencies involved in complex cases. One practitioner from a partner organisation said:

‘They have a balance between trusting us and intervening when it is in the child’s best interests.’

53. Improving outcomes and making sure decisions are made quickly were continuing challenges in enabling safe and effective practice. Most authorities had developed innovative ways of tackling drift. The example below sets out how Hartlepool Borough Council introduced a review system to tackle potential drift early and to support creativity in moving work forward.

Hartlepool Borough Council – multi-agency complex case review

Working with challenging and complex cases can lead to different views within the multi-agency team about what is in the child’s best interest. In response to this, Hartlepool children’s services developed arrangements for multi-agency complex case reviews. Any practitioner can request a review, which provides a forum for discussion, reflection and professional challenge – all from a child-centred perspective.

The review can take different forms including reflective group supervision, a deep dive case analysis or a ‘circle of adults’. The aim is to take a solution-focused approach, analysing the impact of interventions and increasing professionals’ insight into the family and child’s situation.

Complex case reviews are facilitated by middle and senior social work managers and educational psychologists. The facilitator is usually independent of the line management of the case to avoid any conflict of interest and to enable a fresh perspective.

These reviews in Hartlepool have helped professionals working with children to strengthen multi-agency working. It has provided a forum to unpick and move forward with complex and entrenched cases and has led to some successful, radical approaches to meeting the needs of children and families.

54. The example below shows how one authority used performance information to undertake 'deep dives' to ensure that they had a firm understanding of safe and effective frontline practice.

London Borough of Redbridge – performance board deep dives

The children's services management team within Redbridge hold a fortnightly performance board, chaired by the director. The board scrutinises quantitative and qualitative performance information including performance indicators and workforce data. It also discusses key audits and evaluations. The board commissions a programme of 'deep dives' to explore in depth the areas where service improvement may be needed and to allow senior managers to strengthen their 'grip' on frontline practice.

The performance board examined an audit into the quality of child protection plans and, as a consequence of the findings, they commissioned a deep dive into the way that child protection conferences enabled good outcome-focused plans. This led to a number of recommendations and a task and finish group was established to implement them. This included an exploration of the 'strengthening families' methodology, which was later introduced.

The performance board received an initial evaluation of the first 20 'strengthening families' conferences, including feedback from all participants and a full evaluation report a year later. This provided clear evidence that the introduction of the strengthening families conferences had significantly improved parental engagement and understanding of the risks for their child. It enabled workers to clearly articulate the changes needed and lead to more SMART decision making and outcome-focused plans.

55. In one authority there had been a strong focus on achieving permanency in a timely way. A team manager had guided an inexperienced worker through the pre-birth assessment process, the care proceedings and the adoption process. The team manager also helped her to deal with an abusive phone call and to prepare for future confrontation. The social worker explained how she had grown in confidence, gained valuable experience through the case, and now understood the value of securing a permanent family for the baby at such a young age.

56. The emphasis for most senior leaders in developing safe and effective practice was on relationship-based work and listening to what children and young people were saying. This behaviour mirrored that modelled by senior managers in their work with partners, other leaders and staff. This strength in building relationships enabled good practice to flourish and encouraged families to fully engage in work. One social worker told inspectors:

‘The Director told us to record less but SMARTER, to spend less time in front of the computer and more time with families.’

57. A parent of a child on a child protection plan told inspectors:

‘The department have been thorough in assessing me and my partner. Initially I found the social worker difficult and didn’t like her. Now I understand that she was making clear what I had to do and I completely get her. There is a lot of involvement through the child protection plan and core groups every six weeks. My partner and I were both fully involved in the assessment and we give our views at the core group meetings and during visits.’

58. This sentiment was echoed by some of the young people inspectors spoke to. Two of the young people said:

‘I have a good relationship with my social worker and I have had her for a few years ... my social worker helped me and tried to sort things out ... everything has worked out well for me.’

‘I like my social worker. I can tell her anything and she helps me. I can email her and she gets back to me quickly. She comes to see me and my foster carers and when I tell her things she does something about it.’

59. The importance of good, effective and reflective supervision was recognised in all the authorities visited. Some were further ahead than others in ensuring that this was provided regularly. This continued to be a challenge. All of the local authorities were continuing to work on ensuring that reflective supervision was not only offered as standard, but that supervision records demonstrated how discussions had influenced practice.
60. The recording of supervision varied within and between authorities. Inspectors saw several excellent examples of clear, reflective discussions outlining challenge and differences of opinion, detailing reflection and clearly recording the agreed way forward.
61. In one case the line manager’s expertise enabled the social worker to reflect on the impact of his values and the cultural aspects of a case. Managers at all levels knew the case well due to various discussions and the case had been audited by the DCS. Guidance from his managers enabled the social worker to look beyond the presenting issues of the case and to consider the underlying factors and the importance of taking the child’s perspective. The social worker

said that the involvement of managers had enabled him to 'not get sucked into the case but to be able to stand back'. Outcomes in this case included a positive difference in family relationships and, while concerns did remain, these were being managed and contained.

62. When reflective supervision took place it was positively embraced by both managers and practitioners. Staff said it was a truly collaborative approach with challenge coming from both parties. As one worker put it:

'Managers relish the fact that we have our own ideas.'

63. The example below details the London Borough of Redbridge's approach to reflective group supervision.

London Borough of Redbridge – reflective practice in group supervision

Reflective group supervision sessions within Redbridge are provided for newly qualified workers, social work practitioners, quality assurance officers and independent reviewing officers. They are facilitated by the principal social worker, the head of commissioning, quality and finance, and the psychiatric social work manager from the child and adolescent mental health service. Their aim is to:

- provide a learning tool for complex cases, share ideas, challenge stereotypes, explore the impact of family difficulty on social workers and encourage creativity in interventions
- explore case drift
- examine social work values, how they operate in practice and their impact on family functioning, roles and expectations
- analyse the effects of projection, transference and counter transference in relationships between social workers and those with whom they work
- develop effective and imaginative practice
- raise awareness of the self in practice, building on and improving social work resilience and effectiveness.

There has been a reduction in the numbers of children looked after against a trend of yearly increases. This was because either children were being diverted from care or an increasing number were spending less time in care.

Workforce overview

64. Challenges remained in many authorities in recruiting and retaining a skilled and competent workforce. Leaders were developing innovative strategies and ways of overcoming these challenges including:
- succession planning
 - 'growing their own'
 - placing a high importance on learning and development
 - protecting budgets and caseloads
 - allowing workers the space to do their jobs effectively and efficiently.
65. Detailed workforce competency and development frameworks in many authorities set out the behaviour and performance expected from staff. These documents were used well and were understood by staff, who had a clear understanding of the expectations placed on them. As a result, managers were able to monitor performance and support staff if they fell below the expected standards. Key messages about performance and practice at the front line were communicated up to the director and senior team. They were able to identify any gaps or areas for improvement, develop key messages and provide feedback. In some of the larger authorities, it was more challenging to ensure consistency in communications.
66. Leaders retained a relentless focus on the skills and abilities of the workforce, knowing that having a competent workforce was crucial to delivering improvements. A DCS said:
- 'I say to staff "It's my job to make sure you are the best you can be.'"
67. In some areas, recruitment of high-calibre middle managers was a particularly difficult challenge. Many of the authorities had invested in 'growing their own' and in better succession planning. This included:
- encouraging access to training and development
 - funding external courses
 - giving some staff time to complete a Master's degree
 - encouraging a career development pathway that did not require moving into management
 - allowing them to access management training.

68. Kensington and Chelsea introduced their 'focus on practice' model, which allows practitioners to attain senior positions while continuing to focus on frontline practice.

Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea – focus on practice

'Focus on practice' is a three-year initiative across the tri-borough authorities (Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster). This transformation project received funding from the Department for Education's Innovation Programme and was introduced in recognition that there were too many repeat referrals and interventions that did not result in significant change.

The aim of the programme is to provide interventions for families that are purposeful and intensive and that help families to make radical changes in their lives. In consequence, significant cost reduction is expected.

The three key elements of the model are to:

- create time for practitioners to work with families
- develop practitioners' knowledge, confidence and expertise so that they are more effective in creating change
- change the conditions that reinforce and steer practice.

Across the tri-borough a practice career pathway is being developed, enabling those who wish to remain in practice to be promoted, develop their expertise and be paid equivalent salaries to those in management positions. There is a head of clinical practice in each borough, a member of the senior leadership team who works directly with families and will lead the specialist social workers in educating and influencing practice on the front line.

69. Strong leaders encouraged staff to be creative in identifying development opportunities. Other ways of learning were encouraged, such as:
- shadowing other professionals
 - e-learning
 - employing specialist trainers
 - holding practice clinics
 - mentoring.
70. Inspectors clearly identified the impact of training on practice and in better outcomes for children. Staff could articulate how their practice had improved, and how they had shared their training experiences with their colleagues. Providing opportunities for training and development and career progression had resulted in staff feeling that their personal growth and development was

important. They felt an investment was made in them and this, in turn, made them want to stay. One director commented:

‘The more you invest, the more people want to stay.’

71. Several authorities had developed innovative ways of attracting high-calibre staff to the authority. Some had employed professional practice educators to provide guidance to staff alongside the line management structure. North Lincolnshire, for example, had success at stabilising its workforce through encouraging students to take up placements there.

North Lincolnshire Council – social work in education and employment project (SWEEP)

The SWEEP provides a unique practice placement experience for social workers in training and is designed to offer a varied and supportive personalised learning opportunity for each student. Set up in partnership with a local secondary school, it was created to support, educate and enhance the development of social workers in training. The inclusion manager from the school works with a professional educator to deliver training, advise students in respect of early help and link social work development with education.

The project has increased the number of student placements across North Lincolnshire and has provided students with a more varied experience across the child’s journey and in a variety of settings. These include schools, universal and targeted provision, specialist services and statutory child protection work.

Students have access to a resource library, computers and regular support and practice forums. The project has become self-funding as the income generated from student placements funds the post of the professional educator. The system has been successful at attracting high-quality students who want to remain with the authority. Low staff turnover, no agency workers, low sickness rates and fully staffed teams all indicate that the project has played a part in successfully recruiting and retaining a dedicated and committed workforce.

72. In many authorities, leaders encouraged the agency staff employed to attend and share training in the same way as permanent staff. They also encouraged agency workers who were assessed as effective to apply for permanent positions. Several staff who spoke to inspectors had started as temporary workers but had been impressed by the investment in them and had decided to stay.

73. Other measures to ensure the quality of the workforce that leaders had put in place included:
- strict vetting of agency staff
 - revising contracts so that agency staff could not leave at short notice
 - terminating the contracts of agency staff who were not performing satisfactorily.
74. It was critical that local authorities invested in the workforce so that workers had manageable caseloads. This was more of a challenge in areas that had difficulty recruiting. The importance of manageable caseloads was well demonstrated in one case. A manager had taken decisive action to support a social worker when a child they were working with was taken into police protection and subsequently was the subject of an emergency protection order. The social worker said: 'My manager took control of all my work and reallocated it to provide the space I needed. The children were effectively safeguarded and are now living together and thriving.' The social worker felt safe to talk with her managers about where her practice could have improved. The social worker explained with honesty:

'We did some reflective learning from this case. Managers made sure it was discussed in team meetings so that we could learn from it; this is an example of the no blame culture in action.'

Performance management

75. In the early stages of the improvement journey establishing effective performance management was a challenge. At this point leaders were often working with staff who were demotivated and lacked investment in the authority. Some staff had left at this point and others had been dismissed. Most, however, were inspired by their leaders to perform well.
76. Leaders achieved this by being clear about expected standards, leading by example, and continually monitoring performance data and other information. They developed structures to scrutinise data at different levels so that they had a comprehensive understanding of what the data was telling them. They had confidence in the data and used their analysis of it to facilitate further improvements. They fed back information about performance to workers and managers so that they could learn from each other.
77. The elements of leadership style described above were crucial in ensuring that staff felt part of the improvement journey and did not feel 'blamed' for the overall previous poor performance of the authority. Leaders used a variety of methods to motivate, inspire and encourage staff to perform well. Within a supportive and enabling culture, workers were supported to perform to a high standard. A chief executive said:

'I believe if you give a bit, you get it back in spades.'

78. Leaders were explicit about the importance they placed on high performance and clear about what would happen if performance fell below the expected standard. Managers were given the authority to deal with poor performance if support did not work. As one DCS explained:

'Workers know they will be supported but also that managers will act.'

79. DCSs and other leaders used many methods to keep a strong 'grip' on the front line to make sure that the necessary improvements were being made. This involved understanding what was happening on a day-to-day basis, what the quality of practice was like, and what the issues were for staff and for the families receiving the services. Methods included:

- scrutinising and analysing performance information and other data
- examining audit findings for themes and areas for development
- learning from inspection findings and developing robust action plans to address shortfalls
- listening to staff, service users, partners and complainants
- acting swiftly on what was heard.

80. They also proactively gathered feedback from a variety of sources, sent out surveys to assess the 'health' of the workforce and met people face-to-face to enhance their understanding of current issues.

81. Leaders gave clear guidance about how expected standards and performance were linked to overarching strategic priorities. This meant staff were clear about *why* these standards were so important. Leaders ensured that there was clarity around expectations by face-to-face meetings, emails, guidance, policies as well as through team meetings and supervision and other forums. Several authorities provided short good practice guides, aide memoires and bullet-pointed guidance so that workers had ready access to easily-assimilated information.

82. The link between expectations and impact on practice was seen in several cases. In one case a social worker stated that there had been an 'intense drive for us to record the child's wishes and feelings, literally word for word.' The young person in this case had provided written documents and had also attended her reviews, to which she contributed well. The social worker told us:

'Senior managers have a clear vision for what they want for the children we work with. I know that I am expected to deliver high quality standards of social work.'

83. These successful leaders regularly checked compliance with guidance and policies, with daily reports available in some areas. They gave a high profile to

teams and individuals who were performing well. The example below illustrates how Hampshire has driven high performance by being explicit about expected standards.

Hampshire County Council – practice, reference and recording group (PRRG)

The monthly PRRG is chaired by a senior manager from children and families services to ensure that there are quality standards for practice as well as processes to support them. Members of the group include service leads across children and families services as well as representatives from IT, adult services and workforce development.

PRRG reviews current practice requirements and responds to changing legislation and evidence-based research to ensure practice is compliant and up to date. Briefing notes and guidance are issued to all practitioners as well as managers, who are expected to model good practice. Topics covered recently include chronologies, good practice for recording, and planning and reviewing for children in need. All these are kept under regular review and altered accordingly.

The PRRG has promoted high quality standards and expectations for social workers; it generates good practice examples and keeps practitioners up-to-date with legislative changes. Business processes are continually improved and support changes in practice. The guides provide ongoing learning and development; any training needs are identified and fed into the workforce development strategy.

84. Leaders addressed deficits as they arose and identified good practice as it occurred. As a result, differences between teams or areas were addressed before they became ingrained. Leaders drilled down into information to ascertain the story and to ask 'why does it look like this?' The example below details one method undertaken by Hampshire County Council to gather information on frontline performance – the peer inspection framework.

Hampshire – peer inspection framework

Peer inspection is a fundamental part of the Hampshire performance management framework. Each district is inspected twice over a three-year cycle and the inspection lasts from three to five days. The format replicates the Ofsted single inspection framework and places a strong focus on leadership, management and governance. An area director takes the lead for each inspection with a senior manager leading each theme. Any emerging findings may result in an inspection into a particular theme, such as neglect.

Staff from all levels of the organisation are involved in the inspections, including care ambassadors. They are undertaken with a short notice period. Activity includes looking at files, observation of practice, talking to

workers, managers, children and young people, and colleagues from other organisation. Performance information is also scrutinised, although the focus is on quality not just compliance. The inspections focus on the key question 'so what difference has been made?' Feedback is offered to staff on the last day of inspection and inspectors produce a written report within two weeks.

Each district produces an action plan within two weeks of receiving the report, although any immediate safeguarding issues require an immediate action plan. District managers are responsible for monitoring and following up the action plan which is overseen by the area manager.

The peer inspections promote transparency of practice and drive continual improvement. They provide a 'window' to frontline practice, supporting a strong grip on services at both a strategic and operational level. They have enabled managers at all levels to get actively involved in individual cases, which facilitates shared knowledge and credible leadership, and they have set high expectations and ambition for vulnerable children and families.

85. The following example shows how two local authorities scrutinised and used data and information.

North Lincolnshire – case audit framework

The case audit meeting process had been developed in North Lincolnshire to enhance existing processes and to increase the involvement of leaders at every level, from the director to frontline staff. The director chairs the monthly meeting which provides oversight, analysis and challenge of practice, identifying any areas for learning and development.

The process includes feedback from team managers on case audits, live audits completed during the meeting, feedback from children and families, compliance data and direct practice observations.

This process has led to improvements in outcomes on individual cases as well as increased clarity about expectations. As a result of this process, the principal social worker worked with practitioners and managers to agree the 'standards for effective casework', which are now used as a benchmark for all audits and direct observations. They ensure that staff work towards common standards of excellence in their practice.

Hampshire – performance action group

Performance action groups (PAGs) in Hampshire occur on a district, area and county level. District managers lead their team managers through a process looking at key indicators and addressing any concerns. These are followed by area PAGs, in which an area manager leads the district managers through performance indicators and develops an understanding

of the outcomes and performance in their area. Through this process both district and area managers have a firm grip on arising issues and are able to take corrective action to improve performance or identify trends and strengths. Managers ask teams that are showing particularly strong performance to share their approach so lessons can be learnt across the service.

The county PAG also examines a monthly set of indicators, analysing the data on an area and team basis. Queries about the performance in any team are recorded on a data quality form which are then returned to the PAG with an explanation, details of actions and/or strategies to address the issues and an estimated timeframe in which an improvement can be expected. These are followed up to ensure improvements are made. Any good practice is also highlighted by the PAG and cascaded to all teams.

This approach has improved accountability from individual practitioners through to heads of service. It also reinforces the 'golden thread' of performance throughout the service.

86. All of the local authorities had processes to ensure that they became learning organisations. They learnt from local and national serious case reviews and also from local everyday practice. They recognised and celebrated good practice by, for example, holding celebration events or by sending out congratulatory emails from the DCS. The good practice, and other learning, was shared in bulletins and short guides, and aide memoires were produced to help with practice.
87. To ensure that good practice became everyday practice, leaders encouraged challenge at all levels. Staff mostly saw this challenge as being supportive, enabling them to make good decisions and, where necessary, risk was shared by more senior managers. Challenge came from several areas including peers, managers, senior managers, dedicated groups and elected members. Some leaders described consciously developing a culture where challenge was not only safe, but welcomed and expected as a tool to promote improvement.
88. Several authorities had developed policies or structures to introduce challenge at particular points in a child's journey. For example, in Staffordshire managers held a 'critical friend' discussion whenever a child was on the cusp of care to ensure that all possible avenues had been explored and that only those children who needed to enter care did so. Workers saw this challenge from managers as supportive, and as fostering creativity. One social worker stated:

'We value it as progressing personal development rather than feeling threatened by it.'

Listening to children young people and their families

89. Senior leaders in these authorities proactively sought feedback from a variety of sources and acted on it. They were seen to act swiftly. One social worker said:

‘If something’s not working we feed it back and it gets dealt with.’

90. Senior leaders sought feedback from a variety of sources including children and families, staff and partners. All the authorities routinely gathered the views of individual children and families about their experiences.
91. However, there was a considerable challenge in collating this information in an effective way in order to influence future planning. Some authorities were developing creative approaches to systematically gather the views of children and families about their experiences. The example below details the approach taken by North Lincolnshire when evaluating their child protection processes.

North Lincolnshire Council – listening to feedback on child protection conferences

North Lincolnshire has transformed its child protection conference process following consultation with children and families, evaluation of current practice and feedback from Local Safeguarding Children Board training.

Partner agencies were involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of the new process using a peer review approach. Child protection conferences are now more clearly focused on constructive working relationships, critical thinking and risk analysis balanced with information about safety, competencies and strengths. This information is projected onto a whiteboard during the conference to allow ‘live’ analysis to take place.

As well as changes to the process a number of practical changes were also made. These included making the room less formal, building in reading time before the conference and altering the agenda to allow the families’ views to be considered first.

Further feedback from children and families has been very positive, especially in relation to feeling more comfortable and empowered. Performance information indicates that this approach is having a positive impact in enabling plans to be progressed in a more timely manner.

92. Leaders in the authorities visited kept a relentless focus on demonstrating how they were improving outcomes for all the children who received their services. They saw gathering feedback as a crucial element in driving forward such improvements. A young person told inspectors:

‘I went to see where my social worker worked and spent the day there. I met her team and her managers. Meeting the team leader means that

when she is away I know who to contact if I am not happy with something.'

Hartlepool Borough Council – interviews on closed cases

Hartlepool Borough Council seeks feedback from families when a case is closed by interviewing family members to listen to their experiences of receiving a service. Interviews are undertaken by managers independent of the line management of the case to enhance learning.

In these interviews, families reported that they became frustrated when their social worker changed and they had to share their information again with someone new. In contrast, there was a more positive response from families whose cases had not been transferred to another team or worker. When the single assessment was introduced to replace the old initial and core assessments, teams were structured differently to support the case remaining with one social worker throughout the period of involvement.

93. In all the authorities visited, the senior leadership team (including elected members and the chief executive) invested time visiting children and young people, getting to know the cases, and were passionate about doing their best for families. In the example below, the London Borough of Sutton had been proactive in ensuring that senior managers across the borough knew the children for whom they had parental responsibility.

London Borough of Sutton – corporate parenting mentoring scheme for senior managers

The London Borough of Sutton has introduced a mentoring scheme for senior managers, as part of the council's role of corporate parent, to meet the individual needs of children who are looked after or who are care leavers. The managers have attended training commissioned by a local volunteer centre.

Young people's progress is measured five times a year under nine themes:

- support
- empowerment
- boundaries
- expectations
- constructive use of time
- commitment to learning
- positive values
- social competencies
- positive identity.

One young person was referred to the scheme as he was moving towards semi-independent living. He was mentored by a senior manager within the finance and resource team. They shared interests in sport and music and

met fortnightly. The young person has now successfully moved into his own flat and is engaging in sixth form education.

94. Local leaders met young people in a variety of forums including individual home visits with social workers, consultation events and the children in care council. They were keen to listen and to learn about the experiences of children and young people.
95. One high profile case involved a teenage girl who was at risk of sexual exploitation. As a result of the learning and feedback from this case, senior managers developed a policy on managing sexual exploitation and a multi-agency procedure that is now embedded and delivered through the multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) panel. Senior managers showed tenacity in ensuring partner agencies were engaged. The social worker told inspectors that 'there has been an enormous impact as a result of this case as a new procedure and joint approach is now in place which is working really well'. Outcomes for the young person demonstrably improved. She was put in a stable placement and working through her emotional issues and was making good progress at school. Another young person told us:

'I have met the senior managers and was involved in participation groups, they are always at groups and events and talk to the kids. They make themselves known and I think they listen. I know other kids who also see them a lot.'

96. The example below demonstrates how Hampshire was involving young people to influence service design and delivery.

Hampshire County Council – care ambassadors

Underpinning any practice and service developments in Hampshire is the expectation that children and young people have been involved and have had the opportunity to share their views. These are sought in a number of ways but central to the process is the role of the care ambassadors.

The care ambassadors reach out to children and young people in care to gain a comprehensive view from all children in care about what it is like to receive a service in Hampshire. Nineteen young people, either currently looked after or with a care background are employed by Hampshire children's services to represent the voice of children in care and care leavers. The care ambassadors are supervised by a participation officer.

Care ambassadors have influenced services and planning including:

- redesigning care and pathway planning documents
- delivering training
- organising conferences
- developing a website and leaflets for children in care
- facilitating consultation events with other children in care

- recruiting staff
- taking part in peer inspections.

A senior manager from Hampshire said that 'the participation of children and young people is an integral part of what we do, rather than an add-on'.

97. Successful leaders shared positive feedback from families with staff so that joint learning could take place. One case demonstrated the local authority's drive to include fathers in assessments and ongoing work. The social worker had successfully engaged with the father and had secured the confidence of the child to communicate her feelings. Decision making throughout was carefully considered through a process of challenge and reflection, with supervision records demonstrating forthright discussion between the social worker and her manager. The family gave very positive feedback and the young person sent a thank you card to the social worker that she had made and illustrated herself.
98. One young person said:
- 'I get to chair my reviews and set quizzes to see who knows me best. My foster carers and social worker usually win but everyone there knows me well enough.'
99. The example below details how North Lincolnshire is gathering and using feedback from children and families to improve their experiences of services.

North Lincolnshire Children and Families Feedback Framework (CFFF)

Leaders in North Lincolnshire recognised that although families' views had been used to influence individual plans or working practices within specific teams, there was no consistent way of gathering this information across the whole service and using it to inform future learning or service development. They developed the CFFF to tackle this.

The key concept of the framework is that staff use creative and user-friendly methods to gain feedback from families based on five core questions:

- Do you understand the reason we are involved?
- Are you given a chance to have your say?
- Is what we are doing making you/your children safer?
- Do you understand the plan?
- Is there anything we could do to improve?

They record the feedback, making reference to how and where the answers were gained. Every child and family will give their views at least once every three months and also at key points within the progress of their plan. Independent chairs also undertake the process during child-in-

care reviews and child protection case conferences to ensure that there is independent gathering of views.

The information is collated on a monthly basis and fed into the monthly case auditing meeting, which is chaired by the director and attended by senior managers. At this meeting managers ensure that any individual responses have been followed up as necessary. They also identify any themes for learning or service development and determine how these will be addressed.

100. Local authorities routinely dealt with complaints and regularly collated the outcomes, recommendations and learning. Complainants were given time and attention and were seen as a valuable learning tool. Staff and service users were able to talk through and learn from the complaint so that issues reoccurred less often.
101. Leaders considered that a crucial element in their improvement journey was to listen and hear the views of staff and partners, to involve them in changes and to respond quickly when things were not working. This fostered trust in senior leaders across the partnership and enhanced the culture of openness and collaboration.
102. In Hampshire a staff survey is sent out annually and findings are analysed to monitor improvement and to identify areas of concern requiring future actions. When required, an action plan is drawn up and progress is reported to senior managers on a regular basis. A summary is sent out to all social workers, which highlights the outcomes of the survey. As social workers feel increasingly that they have a 'voice', numbers responding to the survey have risen year on year.

Leadership and management structures

103. Management structures varied between authorities, depending on size, geography and history but the common, critical, theme was that there was clarity of role, accountability and responsibility. Chief executives saw their role as being supportive – fostering the right environment for the director and senior management team to undertake their roles successfully. Elected members supported and challenged, providing scrutiny and opportunities for reflection. All leaders kept a firm 'grip' on the quality of practice. All of this was underpinned by the use of data, feedback, intelligence and a balance of styles between leaders.
104. Structures supported effective communication, and this was invariably described as clear and effective. This meant that all members of staff were clear about their role and the expectations that the organisation placed, not just on them, but on other members of the organisation. There were clear accountabilities, with staff at all levels understanding where and by whom decisions should be made.

105. Middle managers played a significant role within these structures, especially in the larger counties. In several authorities, the improvement journey had begun with training and support for existing middle managers, coaching and guiding them and promoting their development so that they could effectively performance manage more junior staff. One chief executive said:

‘The middle managers here are the same now, with a few slight changes, as when children’s social care was poor. What we have done is liberate and enthuse them and we have utilised their talents to get the best out of them.’

106. Strong strategic oversight underpinned leadership and management arrangements. However, there was consensus among leaders that maintaining this comprehensive overview was not an easy task and one which would be impossible were it not for the strength and calibre of the people managing and leading staff throughout the organisation. The support of the chief executive and the lead member, as well as other elected members was critical too.

107. Strategies were almost always aligned and linked to the overarching council plan. Children and families were seen as a top priority. All DCSs stressed the importance of a strategy that spanned the whole of children’s services from early help to care leavers.

108. ‘Twin hatters’, who also managed adult services, saw this dual responsibility as a positive and said that it helped them to expand these strategies to include vulnerable adults who were also parents, as well as services that children would use when they reached adulthood. They also said that their dual role enabled them to emphasise the importance of the children’s agenda in arenas such as the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Adult Safeguarding Board. This provided commitment and continuity for the long term future of children. One DCS said:

‘These are the children who will be the adults in the future and if they are as successful as they can be then this will be to the long term benefit of the county.’

109. Seeing this ‘big picture’ was an essential requisite on which the structures for facilitating good social work were built. Leaders were keen to stress that they were providing services for the whole community, not just the most vulnerable children who were their priority. Providing for the whole community created improvements in support and opportunities for the most vulnerable. This encompassed housing, schools, child care, libraries, sports centres and so on. As one chief executive explained:

‘It’s about more than just providing good services; it’s about regeneration, creating job opportunities and working for the whole community.’

Local partnerships

110. Engaging with partner agencies was important for leaders within children's social care, though it was challenging to achieve consistently. Leaders told inspectors that effective partnerships were based on developing strong relationships. They took a proactive approach and spent time getting to know the leaders of their partner agencies and the services that they provided. One practitioner from a partner agency told us:
- 'The DCS visited every service when she arrived to hear our views and share her thoughts.'
111. Building relationships was crucial in enabling partner agencies to become fully involved in the improvement agenda. Partners developed a good understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities and agreed how they could work together.
112. Inspectors described boards and partnerships as 'mature', meaning that they were based on mutual respect and common purpose, with priorities aligned across the partnership. Differences were dealt with appropriately, relationships were beneficial, challenge was seen as helpful and constructive and all parties were clear about the positive impact that collaborative working had on outcomes for children and families. Leaders across partnerships were resilient and explored ways to tackle problems and find creative solutions.
113. This collaborative approach was coupled with a clear commitment to resolving any issues early and securing the best outcomes. For example in North Lincolnshire senior managers have invested time over a number of years in building relationships with the family courts, the family justice board, the legal department and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). This has enabled them to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of children in the area. They have been able to begin the cultural transformation across services that securing permanency and stability for children is everyone's business and can only be successfully achieved if every part of the family justice system is performing effectively.
114. Many partnerships had invested time in ensuring that there was a common language so that everyone understood what was being said. A shared data set added another layer of scrutiny to frontline practice.
115. The following example demonstrates how Derbyshire's education and children's social care are implementing their joint commitment to improve outcomes for looked-after children.

Derbyshire County Council – Creative mentoring

Creative mentoring is Derbyshire Virtual School’s partnership approach to working with looked-after young people who are struggling to engage in education or at risk of exclusion or disaffection.

When a young person needs support, a creative mentor is commissioned who then works with the young person easing them into a more positive emotional frame of mind.

Briefed jointly by social care professionals and schools, the creative mentor works incrementally with young people. The mentor takes time in getting to know each young person and creative activity introduced. The means of working with the child are always practical, using a range of different tools (for example film, drama, music, poetry, photography and stories) to help young people safely explore the world around them, learn new skills, communicate with others and address personal and emotional issues from an ‘artistic distance’. Activity takes place at home, school or in the community over varying lengths of time, dependent on what specific learning targets are set. The creative mentor is encouraged to get involved and learn new skills alongside the child. This has proved to be a powerful way to build stronger relationships.

Through planning activity collaboratively with the young person alongside their supporting adults, creative mentors help to identify personalised pathways for progression. They carefully nurture young people’s social and emotional development, enabling them to develop their interests, engage fully in education and focus on their ambitions.

116. Partners throughout the areas visited expressed confidence in the local authority – a confidence that had been built up through solid relationships. Partners trusted that the local authority ‘knew what it was doing’ and this trust facilitated appropriate scrutiny. In one authority, each time a proposal for change was presented to the board by one organisation, it was scrutinised by other members of the board. These other members would challenge and discuss the proposals, including visiting frontline services within the partner organisation to assess the impact of the proposed changes.
117. Good partnership working at board level was mirrored throughout this thematic inspection. In several local authorities this was cited as a major shift in recent years. Managers and leaders had invested heavily in partnership work and this had in turn affected the way that practitioners behaved at the frontline. Many practitioners described how there had been a gradual change in culture from one where differences of opinion caused arguments and divisions, to one where differences were discussed openly and constructively and concerns were escalated appropriately. Escalation was used as a way to resolve issues, and to involve senior managers appropriately in case decisions, not as a punitive measure.

118. Practitioners from partner agencies told inspectors that they felt listened to, that their views were sought and, where the local authority was leading, they were seen not just to listen but to act. These practitioners felt involved in case discussions, and were confident in the methods for escalating when there were differences of opinion. A practitioner in a partner organisation explained:

‘Partners feel valued. My opinion counts. We are around the table trying to solve issues together even when they are difficult.’

Relationships between politicians and professionals

119. As with working with partners, the key to successful relationships between politicians and professionals was clarity of roles and responsibilities. Mature, trusting relationships led to constructive scrutiny and challenge.

120. Engaging with elected members was seen as a challenge by leaders in some areas, especially where there was political instability. Leaders, including chief executives and lead members, had invested time and energy in ensuring that all elected members understood the importance of children’s services and the impact that providing good services early had on the future adult population and communities. A chief executive stated:

‘Part of my role is to bring officers’ and politicians’ aspirations together.’

121. In many areas elected members, whatever their political allegiance, clearly understood social work and treated it as a high priority. In one authority the inspector spoke to the new lead member for children and the outgoing lead member. They said:

‘We have worked together in opposition and we’ve worked together in power – we are passionate about children and ensuring that they get the best possible services.’

122. In some authorities young people met elected members regularly to discuss issues relating to being looked after. Elected members built up a picture of what life was like for families and their increased understanding led to better questioning of data and information and more in-depth and knowledgeable scrutiny. The passion and commitment to improving outcomes was evident from elected members in many authorities, and they promoted the council as a ‘provider’ for the children for whom they cared. One member explained this clearly:

‘We promote the council as a ‘family business’, therefore, in the family business there are places for your children – work experiences and preferential options for apprenticeships for example.’

123. In one authority the lead member had raised the importance of looked-after children through his role on the Health and Wellbeing Board. He had asked

other members to 'bring a gift for looked-after children'. Organisations had responded by offering apprenticeships, gym passes and vouchers.

124. Elected members understood their role well and complemented the professional management team, providing scrutiny and challenge within a well-structured system. The following example demonstrates how elected members in Staffordshire took their role seriously, supporting and challenging senior leaders while showing commitment to frontline staff and services.

Staffordshire County Council – Safer and Stronger Select Committee

In December 2012 Staffordshire's Safer and Stronger Select Committee held an enquiry day into Families First, which had been in operation since September 2011. The enquiry held senior managers to account for the performance of the service. It also provided members with the opportunity to explore the impact that Families First had achieved in bringing together a range of services for children, young people and families.

The committee published a report and made various recommendations. One recommendation was that members should visit local support teams and specialist safeguarding units to learn more about these services and to be reassured that they were available in the right place and at the right time. Visits were arranged directly with first line managers and not mediated via senior or middle management. Members undertook semi-structured interviews and spent time with teams to learn more about service delivery and practice. Interviews covered a range of topics including accommodation, co-location, multi-agency working, caseloads, recruitment and retention.

The subsequent committee report states: 'Members found this outward-facing approach very successful in familiarising themselves with the range of services available on their patch to safeguard children. This technique has contributed more widely in assisting them in scrutinising the child protection agenda at committee meetings throughout the year.'

A comprehensive report and a number of constructive recommendations followed. The subsequent action plan has allowed the committee to maintain an overview of the service's development and be actively engaged in performance monitoring. This approach and member engagement was welcomed by the service and has been subsequently repeated with members visiting a range of services and teams for looked-after children.

It has undoubtedly enhanced the working relationship between the committee and Families First. Moreover, the committee's deeper insight has enabled it to offer not only more robust scrutiny and challenge in this important area, but also constructive and positive support to the service.

125. In all the authorities visited, the elected members had protected budgets, social work caseloads and services for children and families. This was in the context of overall budget reductions. In several authorities budgets had been raised in order to invest in recruitment and retention, to protect caseloads and ensure capability and capacity within the organisation. This was a crucial factor in enabling authorities to forward plan effectively.
126. In almost all of the authorities inspectors visited, elected members were seen as champions of children’s services. They were described by staff as knowledgeable, interested, passionate and keen to ensure that messages are being understood. In most they visited the social work offices, visited children’s homes, attended events and ensured that workers saw that their work was important and an integral part of what the council was doing. This also gave members first-hand knowledge about how services were improving the lives of their constituents.

Readiness for innovation

127. Inspectors saw a variety of innovative and creative ways of working – including the tri-borough arrangements within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the joint management of the Isle of Wight by Hampshire County Council. What was common was that many of these authorities were proactively seeking out new ways of working. As one chief executive stated:

‘The world changes, so we are always changing.’

128. Innovation was easier to facilitate in authorities that were already performing well. Those local authorities at an earlier stage in the improvement journey were concentrating on getting the basics right.
129. Authorities proactively sought out funding opportunities. Once they had committed to try something creative they went on to do it, even if the funding was not approved. These authorities were also committed to learning. They got better at innovation as they went along, learning from previous mistakes. As one chief executive said:

‘We try it. If it works we try it again. Things evolve.’

130. Authorities were also keen to learn from others’ experiences. For instance, Hampshire felt that it could learn from the Isle of Wight. The DCS had been impressed by the quality of a serious case review undertaken by the Isle of Wight and that there was an opportunity for learning. The lessons from this serious case review were shared with staff in Hampshire and applied to ongoing practice.
131. There was a clear recognition and acceptance in the local authorities visited that when innovating, things were not always going to work. As a result, workers felt permitted to try things out and felt that they would be supported.

They felt that the risks were not entirely theirs, but shared, and that there would be no blame if things did not work.

132. Extensive consultation took place when major changes and innovations were to have an impact on entire groups or the whole organisation, such as reorganisations, or potential changes in the way services were delivered. Staff told inspectors that they felt involved, that the consultation was a genuine attempt to understand their perspective and to use this in the design and delivery. There were many different vehicles for doing this but the common factor was that staff felt that their views were important and that they were used. Staff were kept informed along the way.
133. This open and honest way of working was generally seen as a shift in focus. The change in attitude was palpable especially in authorities that were at an earlier phase of their improvement journey. A social worker summed this up:

‘We didn’t used to get involved because it didn’t make a difference; they’d made their minds up. But now we are genuinely involved and they really want to hear our views and they really value them and take them on board.’

Conclusion

Throughout this good practice thematic inspection, inspectors found leadership style to be a critical feature of successful leadership. Leaders were open, collaborative, and driven by a strong moral base. They modelled expected behaviour, set clear expectations for staff, were credible and highly visible, and inspired staff to perform well.

They set high standards for workers and developed a culture that was supportive and challenging. They shared risk and responsibility, which engendered trust and loyalty. They encouraged creativity, while ensuring that there was consistency of approach.

Solid and mature relationships were a critical feature of good leadership. Leaders invested time in developing these with other leaders, their staff, their partners and the families with whom they worked. This was mirrored throughout the organisation, with trusting partnership working developing in all the areas visited. Social workers were encouraged to build equally open and honest relationships with families. This was resulting in both improved practice and improved outcomes for children and families.

Annex A. Local authorities visited

Derbyshire County Council
Hampshire County Council
Hartlepool Borough Council
London Borough of Greenwich
London Borough of Redbridge
London Borough of Sutton
North Lincolnshire Council
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Staffordshire County Council

Annex B. Reflective questions for senior managers and leaders

1. How can the leadership team within your authority improve the clarity of the vision for children's social care?
2. What methods of communication, including face-to-face, can you use to improve the consistency of key messages for staff? How can you ensure that these messages are understood and followed up by the necessary action?
3. How clearly do you model the behaviour you expect from your staff? What other opportunities are there to model behaviour?
4. What methods could you use to increase the participation of all staff in designing, developing and implementing improvement?
5. How can you improve understanding of expected standards of performance? What guidance could you provide to ensure staff fully understand and adhere to these standards?
6. What methods can you use to increase your knowledge of individual children and families with whom staff are working?
7. How can you demonstrate to workers that you are interested in what they do, and that you value the work they undertake?
8. How can you improve the range of soft and hard information to obtain a better understanding of the quality of frontline and management practice?
9. What mechanisms could you introduce to ensure that decisions are appropriately overseen by senior managers and that risk is shared?
10. How can you learn from good and poor practice and share this with all staff, managers and partners?
11. How can you ensure that case recording effectively reflects the quality of work undertaken? What evidence of analysis do you expect to see and how will you know if this is then supporting direct work with families?
12. How can you improve the frequency and quality of reflective supervision and ensure that this is recorded to give an accurate account of discussions and decisions?
13. What mechanisms could you introduce to ensure that potential drift and delay in children's lives are tackled at the earliest possible opportunity, and are appropriately managed by middle and senior managers?

14. How could you improve your practice and performance audit methodology to ensure that themes are identified, gaps are addressed, frontline practice is safe and effective and practice is continually improving?
15. How can you improve the workforce development plan to increase clarity of expectations, support and consequences of non-compliance?
16. How should you evaluate the training programme to establish that it is having a positive impact on the quality of frontline practice?
17. How can you more effectively seek the views of children and families who receive your services to ensure that their feedback improves the service?
18. How can you more effectively seek the views of staff and partner organisations to ensure that their feedback on practice improves the service?
19. How can you more effectively use the views of children and families, staff and partners to influence the design and delivery of future services?
20. How could you utilise young people, staff and partner agencies to peer-inspect services?
21. How could you improve the way you utilise information from complaints to improve practice?
22. How can you ensure that senior leaders maintain a strategic overview which encompasses all services from early help through to care leavers?
23. How can issues relating to children and families be more effectively tackled in fora relating to adults such as the Adult Safeguarding Board?
24. How can senior leaders from all local agencies collaborate effectively to help families and children?
25. How can senior managers help elected members to understand the challenges and opportunities for the service?
26. How can elected members be more effectively engaged with children and families, especially those for whom they have corporate parenting responsibilities?