

# The new Ofsted framework for the inspection of children's services and for reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards: an evaluation

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This report offers an evaluation of the new Ofsted framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, and for reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

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## Introduction

Professor Eileen Munro's review of the child protection system in 2011 provided the social work profession and all of us working in or alongside social care services for children and families with a powerful call to reform.<sup>1</sup> In simple terms, we were reminded that in seeking to do our best for children and their families, we had to do more than manage system compliance with process, rules and distracting targets. The review observed that children's experiences, the quality of professional practice and the difference it was or was not making had become obscured from the view of leaders, policy-makers, front-line practitioners, managers and the inspection system.

In the period that followed Professor Munro's review, Ofsted established a new programme of inspection development. Our aim was to focus on improving the way in which inspection evaluates the experiences of children and their families and the progress that they make in direct response to the professional help and support they are given. The clear intention at the time (also in response to a specific recommendation of the Munro review) was to commence a multi-disciplinary programme of inspection of arrangements to protect children and a separate inspection programme of services for looked after children, once the established 2009–12 Ofsted inspection cycle of local authorities had completed.

For a number of complex reasons, including a growing concern about the burden of inspection and 'sector' anxiety about how a shared and transparent single judgement would and could be reached in the context of multi-agency arrangements to protect children, Ofsted decided to defer the start of the multi-disciplinary inspection. In the interim, Ofsted continued with its inspections of child protection, targeted at the weakest local authorities. The development of a single inspection programme (subsuming four separate inspections of protection, care, adoption and fostering) to be undertaken by Ofsted alone was prioritised for launch just six months later than the anticipated multi-agency inspection programme. In June 2013 the development of a review by Ofsted of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) was also announced, provided for under section 15A of the Children Act and its underpinning regulations, which came into force in October 2013.

Ofsted began inspecting local authority children's services under the new 'single' framework<sup>2</sup> in November 2013, announcing at the time that all 152 local authorities in England and the associated LSCBs would be inspected within three years, with a sample receiving an integrated inspection from April 2015.

While the development of the new inspection and review frameworks was undertaken in close consultation with a stakeholder group drawn from directors of children's services, chairs of LSCBs, representatives from the Local Government Association, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Association of

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<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system).

<sup>2</sup> [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130216](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130216).

Directors of Children's Services, there were limited opportunities to pilot and test the programme in advance of the launch. Ofsted was able to undertake only two pilot inspections. It was therefore agreed and announced publicly that the first round of 11 inspections (covering a three-month period) would be subject to comprehensive evaluation and strengthened quality assurance. Ofsted further agreed to make available its report in this regard.

Given the significance of her earlier review and the subsequent reforms to inspection, Ofsted has been fortunate in being able to secure the services of Professor Munro to help with the evaluative work. Her observations and recommendations are contained in summary form in this publication, alongside our own findings and an overview of emerging practice and performance of local authorities and LSCBs against both new frameworks.

Professor Munro's contribution to the evaluation was commissioned by Ofsted as an integral part of the commitment to conduct an early review of the first inspections of local authorities and LSCBs. Her contribution, together with the contributions of all stakeholders, has been invaluable.<sup>3</sup> In compiling this report, we have taken full account of all feedback and have concluded that the framework is fit for the purpose for which it was designed and that the judgements reached in the first 11 inspections are fair and secure. However, the feedback and full findings of the evaluation have helpfully provided Ofsted with clear areas where improvements can be made. This will help to ensure that we are undertaking effective inspections that are both efficient and significant in improving the quality of professional practice and the difference it makes to the lives of children, young people, and their families and carers.

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<sup>3</sup> The full report submitted to Ofsted by Professor Munro can be found at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140099](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/140099).

## **The first 11 inspections and reviews conducted between November 2013 and February 2014<sup>4</sup>**

- Slough
- Sheffield
- Derbyshire
- Hartlepool
- Hillingdon
- Staffordshire
- East Sussex
- Essex
- Bolton
- Coventry
- Hounslow

### **The evaluation activity deployed in the first 11 inspections**

- Additional on-site quality assurance during the inspections and reviews
- Strengthened quality assurance of the written reports following the inspections and reviews, throughout the process leading up to publication
- Reviewing the experiences of Senior HMI responsible for quality assurance
- Reviewing the experiences of lead and team HMI conducting the inspections
- Seeking the views of the local authorities being inspected, both individually and in a formal feedback event
- Meeting with LSCB chairs and the Association of Independent LSCB Chairs
- Professor Munro's own fieldwork and analysis

### **Independent evaluation by Professor Munro**

Professor Munro was asked to consider the implementation and effectiveness of the new frameworks. In the course of her work, she spent time with inspected local authorities (but not LSCBs), inspectors and senior managers at Ofsted. She also spent time on inspection and attended the feedback events that were organised for the evaluation.

In her findings, she reported that she had found widespread endorsement of and support for the new framework among practitioners, managers and leaders in local

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<sup>4</sup> The reports of these inspections and reviews can be accessed at [www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report).

authorities. This she considered to be a major achievement for Ofsted. There was positive feedback that the framework focused on the right aspects of the work and so could be a positive factor for encouraging improvement in the sector.

Professor Munro reported that inspectors now focus more explicitly on the impact of services on children, young people and families, noting that they are giving more attention to how professional tasks are performed as well as whether they are performed. She reported being impressed with the quality of inspector interaction with social workers in respect of case files that were being audited during the inspection, observing their skills in enabling reflective thought and likening the activity to 'critical supervision, giving workers a fair opportunity to demonstrate their reasoning and justify their actions'. She concluded that there is emerging evidence that the framework is having a beneficial influence on the priorities for reform and that it is driving the necessary cultural change, focusing on help for children and families rather than compliance with prescription and the processing of cases through the system.

However, alongside endorsement for the framework, Professor Munro found widespread concern about the demands of the inspection on both inspectors and local authorities, in addition to continuing concern about the reliability and validity of the judgements. Particular issues are raised about consistency between inspectors, the difference between written and verbal feedback, and the transparency of the final judgement. Professor Munro noted the inherent challenges associated with making reliable judgements about the quality of practice. She described the task as easier when an inspection focused (as had previously been the case) on the more measurable aspects of the work with families, rather than being motivated by and seeking to understand the experiences of a child and family being helped, protected and afforded care. She further pointed out the major weakness in an inspection of things that are 'easily measured' – that this results (as has happened in the past) in the system wrongly prioritising these quantifiable matters over less tangible but critical activities such as the quality of communication with families and the effectiveness of the help that is made available to them. Professor Munro similarly warned against inspection reports using the language of certainty, given the unpredictable nature of work in supporting families and protecting children, and she further advised against the use of over-simplified causal claims in judgements about effectiveness. She recommended that Ofsted consider instead how to ask local authorities for their evidence about the quality of professional practice and what positive difference this had made to the experiences and progress of children and their families and carers.

The issue of data management was significant in the evaluative work that Professor Munro undertook. She found that in focusing on the quality of practice and the experiences of children, their families and carers, a 'vast' range of data was generated. She observed that this was likely to require a more formalised system to manage it and render it less susceptible to the usual biases of data analysis.

Helpfully, Professor Munro reported that she also observed the very real tension and divide that seems to have emerged in the system relating to practice and process in

the work to help, care for and protect children. She reminds us that the two are connected and not helpfully separated. Process is a part of practice as long as it helpfully contributes to the outcomes and experiences of children and their families.

Professor Munro pointed to the importance of records as children's histories, but also to their critical function in assisting the proper management of cases so that the cumulative impact of incidents and events can be properly understood by courts and decision-makers throughout the system.

Ofsted was also asked to consider how to improve its narrative in reports about the importance of good process in supporting effective practice.

Regarding the impact of the inspections, Professor Munro reported that there were serious concerns about demands they made on local authorities for time, data and support. While she acknowledges that the four previously separate inspections might have been more burdensome, the demands may have been less visible because they were not experienced as one event. She referred also to anxiety in the system and the persistence of 'blame culture', advising that it is not just counter-productive but damaging when senior staff are dismissed following an inspection. Professor Munro did not attribute the 'blame and dismissal' issues to Ofsted, but did observe that it would be helpful for Ofsted to make the detail of the overall inspection judgement clearer in relation to its nearness to the adjacent grade. In her view this might enable the reform and improvement plans to be more clearly observed in a report, thereby communicating that while practice and impact may not yet be good enough, the change programme in place is likely or otherwise to deliver improvement.

## Recommendations to Ofsted from Professor Munro's evaluation

1. Ofsted should explore the advantages of using **qualitative software to assist data management**, since the new inspection framework requires the collection and analysis of both more data and more types of data. Such software could improve the transparency of the judgements on local authorities and contribute to increasing the sector's confidence in them.

**Action:** During 2014 Ofsted is trialling the use of qualitative software to assist with the analysis of data on inspection.

2. Ofsted should consider increasing inspector **training in research methods** and project management.

**Action:** This is being considered, but in the interim, our conducting guidance on managing and leading inspection activity is being strengthened. We will publish the revised guidance no later than 31 July 2014.

3. The new judgements involve combining qualitative and quantitative data and there can be no algorithm for this. To improve consistency among inspectors, it is recommended that Ofsted set up a **consistency panel** in which all



inspectors discuss, review, and seek to standardise their judgements before the final judgement is announced.

**Action:** Ofsted is considering how it is possible to set up a panel without increasing the duration of each inspection or delaying the award of a final judgement. A decision will be announced no later than 31 July 2014 with implementation in September 2014.

4. Ofsted should make any **moderation process more transparent** to build up confidence in the sector.

**Action:** The guidance on conducting inspections will be revised to set out clearly the internal processes in place where inspection reports are submitted for clearance and proposed final judgements are not agreed. The revised guidance will be published no later than 31 July 2014.

5. The contents of Annex A should be scrutinised with a view to appraising the cost–benefit ratio and either considering removing items or encouraging inspectors to make use of them to show local authorities why the data are informative.

**Action:** Annex A has been amended to take account of feedback from local authority representatives who manage performance information. The use of data during the first year of the inspection cycle will be reviewed again at the end of November 2014.

6. There should be a **narrative paragraph** attached to the final judgement that gives **more detail** about how **near** the local authority was to the **grade in an adjacent category**.

**Action:** Ofsted is considering how to implement this recommendation, with additional detail either included in the summary section of the report or as an integral element of the leadership and management judgement. This will be completed no later than the end of November 2014.

7. The new inspection framework is encouraging desired improvements in the sector but inspections could become more influential by **changing the language** that they use so that they **help to embed the cultural changes being sought**. Areas where work on this could be beneficial are:
  - developing more realistic language and **clearer recommendations** about **risk management** that avoid the impression that risk can be eliminated by professionals or that they can predict the future with absolute accuracy
  - undertaking more work on how to **discuss practice, avoiding** the conceptualisation of a **sharp process/practice divide** that has become widespread, and locating some process within practice, showing how it contributes to good outcomes for children.

**Action:** Ofsted will be developing two new training modules for inspectors during 2014. One will examine the importance of good processes in the protection and care of children and young people. The second will support the making of more effective recommendations for improvement and the review of language in inspection reports to avoid unrealistic assurances being given about the safety and protection of children and young people.

8. Inspection is rightly concerned with finding out whether children and young people are helped by the services provided, but the complicated causal links between professional practice and outcomes make it difficult to make judgements about causality rather than just correlations. Further work on **how to understand the causal processes and what types of comments can be made about effectiveness** could improve the rigour and transparency of inspections. **Ofsted should also pay more attention to how the local authority obtains feedback about both the experiences of those using services and the impact in terms of achieving goals and solving problems.**

**Action:** Ofsted will consider and work closely with local authorities on the development and use of self-assessments to support inspections. The development phase will begin in September 2014, with a view to commencement from April 2015.

9. Since reform and improvement are such important dimensions of the current work environment, inspectors should consider **paying more attention to the local authority's reform plans** (or lack of them).

**Action:** This will be addressed in revised conducting guidance to be published by 31 July 2014 and in the developing Ofsted improvement support programme.

10. In the longer term, as more innovative ways of working are introduced (and the Department for Education's Innovations Programme makes it likely that there will be some radical, whole-system changes), more work may be needed on defining and **describing 'good' practice**. It is recommended that, if such a need arises, consideration is given to consulting the **College of Social Work** and the **Chief Social Worker for Children and Families**, since they too are concerned with defining 'good' practice.

**Action:** Ofsted is very positive about and committed to working closely with the College of Social Work and has plans in place already for 2014. When we revisit the criteria for 'good' protection, care and support, we will engage with both the college and the chief social worker.

## Internal evaluation<sup>5</sup>

### The framework

Those local authorities and LSCBs that were inspected or reviewed provided positive feedback about the content of the frameworks and the range of judgements. The criteria describing 'good' protection, help, care and leadership in the framework for local authorities have also been widely accepted, as has the use of 'inadequacy' as a limiting judgement across both frameworks.

The introduction of 'requires improvement' in place of the previous judgement of 'adequate' is considered by local authorities and LSCBs to be a harder inspection outcome to manage, being perceived to be 'below the line'. While Ofsted's decision to set the minimum standard of 'good' for all services and settings it inspects has been widely welcomed and accepted, there is early but compelling evidence that the performance width of the 'requires improvement' judgement now needs definition when it is awarded as the overall inspection grade.

In respect of the new adoption graded judgement in the local authority framework, the first inspections caused some confusion about the interaction of the inspection criteria and the data used for the scorecard. Ofsted's framework is clear that timeliness of decisions and placement is one of many criteria considered in the award of a judgement and so there cannot and must not be a fixed conclusion about the direct effect of scorecard data and the judgement. Ofsted has since sought to clarify this position with those local authorities inspected and will be reissuing the conducting guidance to confirm that the data must be used as evidence, but in the context of all other inspection evidence and, very particularly, the experiences and progress of children and young people.

**Action:** Ofsted is considering how to provide additional narrative in inspection reports where a judgement of 'requires improvement' is awarded. This will be in place by 30 November 2014.

In respect of the adoption scorecard data and their impact on the adoption graded judgement, revised conducting guidance will be issued no later than 31 July 2014. Advice for inspectors has been clarified in the interim.

### Data and information

Most local authorities and LSCBs were able to provide the data requested in support of the inspections and reviews.

There was concern from a small number about the extent to which the information was used to support the work of inspectors, leading to questions about its purpose.

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<sup>5</sup> The summary in this section is drawn from feedback from local authorities that have been the subject of inspection, inspectors, senior inspectors and LSCB chairs.

In the very earliest inspections, Ofsted teams and data analysts were overwhelmed by large volumes of data that were not prioritised or provided as digestible management information reports. Ofsted has issued revised guidance reaffirming that the information is to be submitted in the form already used by managers and senior management teams to oversee local performance and the experiences and progress of children, and to understand the flow of work through the system. Interim clarification has also been given to local authorities in respect of the reports that are to be run to support the selection of cases.<sup>6</sup>

Inspection teams reported that the amount of preparatory time and analytical resource needed to consider the data was a factor affecting the amount of information that could be processed in advance of arrival on site. The volume of activity once the inspection has commenced makes it very difficult to find the additional reading time.

**Action:** Proposals are also being considered for further senior analytical officer involvement in inspection, including deep analysis of Annex A child level data during inspection and the use of specialist tools to identify lines of enquiry from the case sampling and tracking.

Ofsted is requiring senior inspectors to review the use of the data provided in Annex A to ensure that the content can be processed at the start of the inspection. Internal guidance has also been issued to all inspectors requiring them to properly and clearly include Annex A data in inspection reports.

## The size of inspection teams

Some of the early inspections and reviews were conducted by teams of up to 10 or 11 people, which led to some local authorities commenting that they had difficulty in accommodating the team and were 'overwhelmed' by such a large group arriving on site. Lead inspectors similarly commented on the complexity associated with managing large teams with a new framework at the same time as having to support inexperienced inspectors. Inspectors joining in week three also reported having to spend considerable time 'catching up' with colleagues who had been on site during the first week of the inspection.

The large teams for these early inspections were inevitable given the number of new inspectors recruited during the summer of 2013, for whom it was necessary to provide training and 'shadowing' opportunities on these new inspections.

Ofsted had additionally taken the decision to strengthen the quality assurance presence in these first inspections, meaning that a senior inspector was also on site for more time than would normally be the case. Now that the initial evaluation has been completed, the teams will typically consist of seven inspectors, including the lead inspector, with newly appointed inspectors occasionally shadowing the

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<sup>6</sup> [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130216](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130216).

inspection team. Depending on contextual factors, such as the size of the local authority being inspected, the size of the inspection team may be increased or decreased by one person.

## The leadership of inspection teams

The relationship between the lead inspector and the Director of Children's Services was acknowledged in the evaluation as being a significant factor in the success of the inspection. Differences in the style, content and setting up of inspections were reported and considered to be unhelpful. Some authorities and LSCB chairs were encouraged to present an opening assessment, while others reported that this opportunity was not provided. Those local authorities who were able to present an overview said that this was a very positive experience. Inspectors also welcomed this framing activity, stating that it provided a context for key lines of enquiry.

**Recommendation:** Ofsted recommends that local authorities and LSCBs undertake a thorough self-assessment, based around the key judgements of the inspection and review, particularly focusing on the experiences of children, young people and families and the progress they make. It will also be helpful to consider the questions in Annex A that may not be easily presented in spreadsheet form but which are significant in providing inspectors with an evidence base about the use of management information and the oversight of important issues affecting children and young people locally.

## Feedback, judgements and moderation

Local authorities and LSCBs generally agreed that the inspections and reviews were identifying the right areas for development. There was also agreement that the findings of both were broadly in accord with what local authorities and LSCBs had expected, though some local authorities could not understand the influence of the graded judgements on the overall judgement. Ofsted's review of the reports published to date is that the recommendations could be clearer and more specific about what needs to change.

Daily contact with directors and senior staff was acknowledged to have been productive and useful in the majority of inspections, although for some there was said to be dissonance between the ongoing feedback throughout the fieldwork and the judgements awarded at the end of the inspection.

Given the scope of the inspection, the volume of data generated and the pressure on time during the inspection, several lead inspectors reported that the quality of feedback and reporting would have been improved if there had been more time to reflect and discuss the emerging overall judgement. This was especially the case in those authorities where the judgement was considered to be finely balanced between two grades.

In the case of inspections and reviews, where judgements were moderated through the quality assurance process, local authorities and LSCBs strongly called for a more transparent process, giving a fuller account of both the internal process and the reasons for any subsequent changes.

**Action:** Ofsted will continue with strengthened quality assurance of inspection reports for the first year of the cycle, providing a specific review of the recommendations for improvement.

Quality assurance leads for the inspections will be required to review feedback about emerging evidence throughout the inspection to ensure that it is both clear and congruent with the provisional judgements given at the end of the inspection.

Ofsted is further considering the introduction of an internal panel whose principal task would be to test the consistency of provisional judgements across inspections before the submission of final judgements for clearance.

The guidance describing both the process of moderation and the use of the 'flawed' inspection protocol will be reviewed and republished by the end of July 2014.

## Learning from the first inspections and reviews

In the strongest authorities, it is encouraging that Ofsted inspections have identified clear evidence of 'good' help for families alongside effective protection and care for children. The engagement of children and young people is also prioritised and their voices and experiences are relentlessly sought in the help they are offered.

In these places, early help extends beyond strategic intent. Inspectors are finding services and professionals from schools, health services, police and the voluntary sector that are woven into an 'early offer' for families. These services are known and they make a difference.

Assessments that are completed are consistently good. They identify risks, needs and clear next steps with timescales. The capacity of parents to change is well expressed in records and there are explicit objectives in plans about what has to be achieved by parents and carers in respect of protecting and caring for their children. Plans further make clear the consequences of no change, and in the most effective authorities, non-compliance equates to decisive and well-informed action to protect children quickly. Chronologies in these cases are well established and provide an ongoing cumulative picture of the experiences of children. This clearly supports good decision-making in their best interests.

What is striking in the authorities judged to be 'good' is the centrality and importance of direct work with families. They report having stable relationships with social workers and there is consistent case file evidence showing that assessment is derived from ongoing and regular contact housed in a relationship that is firmly established between the worker and the family. This contrasts directly with weaker

practice, where assessment is conducted as a single exercise dominated by forms. It is a means in itself, often characterised by several disconnected attempts at assessing, while in the strongest places it is very clearly constructed from knowledge and continuous engagement with the adults and children it concerns. In these cases, again, inspectors found that there is usually a theoretical framework informing professional practice, giving staff more confidence and enabling consistency in the work that they undertake with families.

When children require protection in stronger authorities, it is clear that action is taken in their best interests and quickly. Legal decisions are consistent and legal advisers are able to work closely with social workers. Cases are supported in the courts. Looked after children are making more progress in school than in less effective authorities, where their achievement is not so closely monitored or prioritised.

Inspectors found also that in stronger authorities permanent new homes are found more quickly for children who are looked after; in one authority, the time taken from approval to matching was typically three months. There are more placements to enable children to live with brothers and sisters.

Lastly, in 'good' authorities, Ofsted is finding that investment in the professional environment enables social work to flourish. Workloads are understood and closely monitored, and management oversight focuses on quality as well as volume. Vacancies are reviewed and leaders have local knowledge and strategies to help them retain and attract new staff. Supervision and training are effective and managers know the children and care plans well. Principal social workers influence practice and provide the professional voice in senior management teams.

Strengths and weaknesses are known by leaders (politicians too) and critically there is an action plan in place that benefits from strong performance management and prioritisation of both resource and oversight. Learning forms the foundation of these plans.

In the course of this initial evaluative work, Ofsted reviewed the characteristics of local authorities being awarded the new judgement of 'requires improvement'. There are two distinct differences in the inspection evidence that has been considered.

- The quality of professional practice at the front line and the effectiveness of decision-making in respect of help, care and protection are far more variable.
- The quality, specificity and oversight of the processes to support the child protection and care systems are less robust and contribute to less good experiences for children, young people and families.

Multi-agency work and professional participation in basic protective activity is highly variable, and this has a significant impact on the quality of assessment, the understanding of risk and timely agreement about next steps. In practical terms, this

is often visible in professional absence from child protection strategy meetings, case reviews, case conferences and LSCB meetings.

There is an associated body of evidence that in these places protection and care thresholds are less consistent and more inflexible. Reports describe higher thresholds and children not receiving help when they need it. In some instances meeting threshold criteria is more dominant than the seeking of an understanding about what is needed and whether it can be provided. The risk to families where help is not available is considered less often.

Significantly, where a judgement of 'requires improvement' has been given, inspectors have found evidence of Section 20 of the 1989 Children Act being deployed for children where the threshold of significant harm is met and therefore Section 31 should apply.

Other themes emerging in authorities where performance is judged to be weaker include the help for families ceasing too early, less rigorous or delayed action where children remain at risk of harm, and plans that are not specific about either action to be taken or the changes that need to take place. Management oversight is less persuasive and in almost every authority judged to 'require improvement', workloads for social workers were too high, making it impossible for them to do their jobs effectively. In some places the impact was already being seen in less stable staffing, where turnover directly compromised the quality of relationships that workers could have with families.

Performance is not monitored strongly and often volume is measured in place of quality and impact. Children's voices are present but faint in the system, and their attendance at conferences and reviews is not consistent. For children who are looked after, the sufficiency strategy does not provide well for their needs and placements are in shorter supply.

The evidence supporting the reviews of LSCBs shows that those judged to be 'good' are characterised by clarity of responsibility among the chair, the director of children's services and the chief executive. This clarity and visibility extends to connectivity with local decision-makers, particularly health and well-being boards and clinical commissioning groups. In stronger LSCBs, priorities and resources (to enable the board to carry out its functions) are more likely to be shared among partners. Inspectors saw evidence of boards being able to influence shared investment in initiatives to support families before the formal social care service was required.

The defining characteristics of 'good' LSCBs include a focus on practice, both through section 11 audits that are mature and which continually develop around new priorities and challenges, for example the sexual exploitation of children, and through the training that is developed for all staff. Learning from practice is evident in areas with effective LSCBs, where case audits show that practice changes and improves at the front line across a range of multi-disciplinary services.



In those areas where the LSCB was judged to 'require improvement', inspectors found that priorities were often newly expressed and not yet integrated into the business of the boards. Scrutiny of and challenge to practice tended to be agency-specific, neither of these being undertaken collaboratively or at the interface of services, where the needs of children are often acutely in view but responsibilities are unclear. Partners are less engaged with the board and with each other and they are not able to provide sufficient evidence about accountabilities, for example in the cases of children missing from home or care. The quality of practice is less well prioritised by weaker boards. Inspectors found less evidence of practice audit overview and limited monitoring by the board of progress against agreed priorities. Boards are also making less use of performance data to support them in their function of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of what is being done by the authority and partners to help, care for and protect children. While learning from practice is in evidence, it is often about structures and not the practice of protection and care.

An emerging theme was how the effectiveness of boards relates to the extent to which partners are able to hold each other to account at the highest level for poor or stagnant practice. The reviews showed that stronger boards are able to use their clearer lines of accountability and responsibility to challenge and coordinate change and improvement. They are also clearer about their role as set out in the 2004 Children Act 'to ensure the effectiveness of what is done by each person or body for the purposes of protecting children and promoting their welfare'. Their activity and priorities clearly delineate the boundary between operational delivery (for which the board has no responsibility) and the evaluation of the effectiveness of all statutory partners in protecting and caring for children and young people.

## **Further evaluation and review**

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the authorities, LSCBs and inspectors who contributed to this evaluation. Thanks are also due to Professor Eileen Munro, whose observations have helped us enormously in our thinking about inspections, both current and future.

We have evaluated the early inspections both to improve the quality of our work and, very importantly, to receive and respond to feedback about our contribution to the protection and care of children and young people. We will be continuing to evaluate and review these inspections on a rolling programme and are also committed to a further review after the first year of the cycle has completed.