

# High expectations, high support and high challenge

Protecting children more effectively through better support for front-line social work practice

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Front-line social workers play a key role in protecting children and young people from harm. They assess whether children are suffering or are likely to suffer significant harm and take the lead role in relation to multi-agency child protection plans that prevent children suffering harm or harm reoccurring in the future. This report explores how senior managers in 14 local authorities successfully implemented a range of strategies to better support their front-line staff working in child protection and asks whether there is a demonstrable link between better support for staff at the front line and better outcomes for the children and young people they serve.

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## Executive summary

Front-line social workers play a key role in protecting children and young people from harm. They assess whether children are suffering or are likely to suffer significant harm and take the lead role in relation to multi-agency child protection plans that prevent children suffering harm or harm reoccurring in the future.

Professor Eileen Munro in her final report, *A child-centred system*, acknowledged the significant contribution that social workers can make to improving the lives of children and their families.<sup>1</sup> She emphasised, however, that 'to be able to practice well, social workers have to be employed in an organisation that supports them and their professional development'. Professional judgement needs to be exercised in a context where the right institutional structures and support are provided. This report examines in some depth how senior managers in 14 local authorities successfully provided those structures and supports and implemented a range of strategies to better support their front-line staff working in child protection. Inspectors met with front-line social workers and managers as well as senior managers, and explored the situations of 38 children and young people who were subject to child protection plans. The report highlights the features of being well supported that were most important to front-line staff and identifies the impact of being well supported, the difference it made to their confidence and competence, and ultimately to improving outcomes for children and families.

The survey found that accessible and visible senior managers, who enjoyed strong political and corporate support, created or further developed organisational cultures that were characterised by high expectations, high support and high challenge. These cultures formed the bedrock on which other support strategies were built.

Those local authorities that offered good support to their front-line staff shared a number of common features:

- they made long-term investments to secure a stable and competent staff group and enabled them to remain with the authority
- they prioritised the development of high-quality supervision and supplemented this with a number of different mechanisms to assist with complex and risky decision-making
- expectations of supervision were clearly laid out and some authorities invested additional resources to ensure greater frequency of supervision
- staff were supported effectively to critically analyse their practice and to manage the emotional impact of child protection work

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<sup>1</sup> *The Munro review of child protection*, Department for Education, 2011; [www.education.gov.uk/munroreview](http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview).

- well-timed, relevant and good-quality learning and development opportunities also contributed to staff being well supported
- the quality of practice and supervision was robustly scrutinised through the monitoring and audit of performance – although this was not routinely focused on the impact of practice on outcomes for children.

In examining the situations of the 38 children and young people, inspectors found clear confirmation of the importance of holistic and systemic support for staff and that the different aspects of support were mutually reinforcing. The support provided by first line managers was the most crucial and was mediated through the provision of a clear planning framework, their detailed knowledge of families, their critically reflective and emotionally supportive formal and informal supervision and their direct contact with families. The quality of line management support was particularly important at key points in the child's journey, notably the recognition that a child protection plan would be needed; at the point of making the plan; and in deciding to discontinue the plan. It was also vital to help social workers recognise and successfully challenge parental non-engagement. However, the quality of the support provided by line managers was not sufficiently represented in written records.

Inspectors found that social work teams offered a high level of mutual support which contributed significantly to motivation and enjoyment of the work. Having their own physical space was important in creating the conditions in which mutual support could flourish. Families benefited because teams worked cooperatively to manage crises and provide continuity in a social worker's absence.

Senior managers provided scrutiny of plans, which was welcomed by social workers, and they owned key decisions in particularly complex situations. They also allocated scarce resources. Their willingness to get closely involved with practice enabled social workers to feel more secure and able to take well-managed risks. Partner agencies supported social workers through their willingness to take shared responsibility for risk management and to directly engage with parents and/or children in making changes.

Front-line staff mirrored in their behaviour and relationships the way in which they were supported by managers at all levels in their dealings with families. Being well supported enabled front-line staff to feel less worried and more confident about the risks they were managing and to become more focused, clear sighted and assertive. Scrutiny was welcomed as a key component of support; it made staff feel safer and appreciated for their good work. As a result inspectors found that front-line staff were very motivated to engage families effectively in child protection plans. They were confident about asserting children's needs and clearly stating what needed to change. Parents responded to this by deciding to trust in their social workers and collaborate with them. As a consequence children and young people became safer, less anxious and happier. They were healthier and could achieve more at school and lived in better-quality environments.

Inspectors were able to meet with a small number of children, some of whom could clearly describe the positive changes in their lives. The 29 parents to whom

inspectors spoke identified the improvements that they had experienced as a result of child protection plans put in place. They were all helped to understand why the plan was necessary and had good opportunities to contribute their perspectives. They felt appreciated for their achievements and identified their relationships with social workers as of critical importance in helping them make changes.

Front-line staff and inspectors were able to identify the positive outcomes for children and young people from successful child protection plans. However, practice varied between local authorities in relation to defining, recording and reviewing desired outcomes when plans were made. None of the authorities had developed a process for aggregating outcomes across groups of children. This was a missed opportunity to identify the factors associated with success and failure and to learn from them.

Social workers in the survey identified a lack of time and resources, together with high caseloads, as barriers to providing high-quality support to families. However, front-line staff were engaged in actively resolving these problems and senior managers offered good support to their staff by developing a number of initiatives to overcome these challenges. Ensuring that caseloads were manageable continued to be a major challenge for many local authorities and the skills and creativity of team managers along with a flexible approach across team boundaries were pivotal in managing demand and workload pressures.

## Key findings

- Where social workers were well supported, outcomes for the children subject to child protection plans improved in a number of aspects. Children became safer, healthier, less anxious, happier, more able to learn and more effectively supported by their wider families.
- Receiving effective support enabled front-line staff to have a greater clarity of purpose and to more accurately assess the quality of parenting. They felt contained and safe and thus better able to identify and manage risk. They were more confident in the 'rightness' of their decisions which increased their motivation to engage families and to recognise parents' strengths.
- Effective support depended on the creation of organisational cultures that were characterised by high expectations, high support and high challenge.
- Local authorities that supported social workers effectively shared a number of common characteristics: in particular the emphasis on a 'no blame' approach in the context of mutual ownership and responsibility in managing risks, as well as a strong emphasis on professional and productive relationships.
- Accessible and visible senior managers played a significant role in developing and sustaining empowering cultures that facilitated the exercise of skilled professional responsibility.
- Strong and knowledgeable political and corporate support were vital to enable directors of children's services to develop supportive organisations.

- A number of features were shared across local authorities that supported their staff effectively:
  - recruitment was well planned, rigorous and forward looking; providing high levels of support and challenge at all stages of the social work career pathway was as important as financial reward in retaining staff
  - clearly defined standards and expectations were accompanied by systematic performance audits and evaluation of the quality of practice and supervision
  - regular and high-quality line management support and supervision were most effective when staff were helped to manage the emotional impact of the work and to critically reflect on practice
  - front-line staff were emotionally, intellectually and practically well supported by their teams; the cooperation this engendered benefited children by offering consistency and effective responses to crises
  - well timed and relevant learning and development improved the quality of practice
  - partner agencies offered support through their ownership of shared responsibility to identify and manage risks, their willingness to challenge and resolve differences of professional opinions and their active engagement in change-focused work.
- The most important form of support was provided informally and formally by line managers through their detailed understanding of work, reflective supervision, and their direct involvement with parents.
- Social workers considered that scrutiny and knowledgeable challenge were integral to their feeling supported and empowered to exercise their professional judgement.
- Front-line staff greatly valued the high level of mutual support provided by their team. This contributed significantly to their motivation and enjoyment of the work. Having team space was important to enable this support to flourish. Families benefited because teams managed crises collaboratively and provide continuity in a social worker's absence.
- Support for social workers at critical points in the life of a child protection plan was crucial, notably at the commencement of the plan; in making a decision to end a plan; or in enabling social workers to challenge parental non-engagement.
- Social workers were modest about their own contributions. Personal qualities such as respect for parents, persistence and creativity were critical factors in engendering positive change.
- The positive quality and nature of relationships between senior managers and diverse groups of front-line staff were also reflected in the quality of relationships between social workers, parents and children.

- Parents were included well in planning and decision-making. They recognised the crucial importance of committed and honest relationship building which enabled them to trust social workers and fully engage in child protection plans.
- Few case records did justice to the quality and impact of critical analysis that inspectors identified as taking place, or evidenced the impact of support on outcomes.
- The extent to which written plans and reviews of plans clearly identified desired outcomes and the changes that subsequently occurred was variable.
- Local authorities did not have systems in place to track and aggregate the impact of child protection plans.
- The effectiveness of support was measured through feedback from staff and by extrapolating from ongoing monitoring and auditing. Formal evaluation of the impact of support was complex and rarely undertaken.
- Creative, locally generated solutions were developed to identify additional resources, release time for social workers to work with children and families and to keep caseloads manageable. Sustaining and extending these improvements in the face of financial stringency is an ongoing challenge for all authorities.
- Responding to demand and creating manageable caseloads were priorities for all local authorities. Skilled team managers ensured the fair allocation of work. A flexible 'one authority' approach in which pressures and referrals were shared across teams was essential.

## Introduction

1. During the last few years there has been a renewed focus on the social work profession, particularly on those professionals providing child protection services. Both the current and previous governments have emphasised the critical role of effective front-line social workers in protecting children. The Social Work Reform Board is overseeing a comprehensive programme for reform. Most recently Professor Eileen Munro, in her fundamental review of the child protection system, commented that, 'there is a clear need to improve the capabilities of social workers so that they are better able to exercise professional judgement' in relation to complex and uncertain situations. The interim report, *The child's journey*, outlined those key features of organisations which Professor Munro believed impact on the support that social workers receive.<sup>2</sup> This included the overall working culture, management of time, professional supervision and development, and the provision of tools and resources.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Munro review of child protection: interim report – the child's journey*, p 63, Department for Education, 2011; [www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/laupdates/a0075455/the-munro-review-of-child-protection-interim-report-the-childs-journey](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/laupdates/a0075455/the-munro-review-of-child-protection-interim-report-the-childs-journey).



It also suggested that social workers would be prevented from leaving the profession:

‘If they were more effectively supported in handling the emotional, moral and cognitive aspects of the work, were given the opportunity to develop expertise, and were given the chance to work with families to help them instead of becoming mainly case managers who assess and refer on.’<sup>3</sup>

2. Ofsted has previously identified in Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector’s Annual Report 2009/10 that the children’s social care system is under considerable pressures including from recent steep rises in demand, an increasing number of children subject to child protection plans and a national shortage of experienced front-line social workers.<sup>4</sup> Inspection evidence suggests that there can be a huge variation in the quality of services provided between authorities facing very similar challenges.
3. The Annual Report for 2010/11 commented that social care services ‘which are struggling to deliver the outcomes that children deserve are not yet learning quickly enough and effectively enough from the best’.<sup>5</sup> Accumulating inspection evidence provides a clear picture of the characteristics of effective support for front-line child protection social workers. However, less clear are the different routes that local authorities have taken to improve support to their front-line staff; how they have evaluated the impact of the resources they have committed; and critically, what is the link between better support for social workers and better outcomes for children at risk of harm?
4. Local authorities surveyed strongly believed that well-supported social workers create effective working relationships with children and parents. This enables the required changes to take place which in turn make children safer and improve their well-being. This survey explored the process by which senior managers systematically implemented a range of strategies to better support their front-line staff working in child protection. It also assessed the views of social workers and first line managers about how they experienced this in practice; what difference it made to their confidence and competence, and ultimately to improving outcomes for children and families.

## Methodology

5. A small sample of 14 local authorities was selected. Six of the authorities had recently received a full inspection of services for safeguarding and looked after

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<sup>3</sup> As footnote 2, p 75.

<sup>4</sup> *The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills*, 2009/10, paragraph 363, Ofsted, 2010; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annual-report-of-her-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-200910](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annual-report-of-her-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-200910).

<sup>5</sup> *The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2010/11*, Ofsted, 2011; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1011](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1011).

children and were judged as good or outstanding. The other local authorities were judged to be performing well or excellently in the 2010 Children's Services annual rating and were identified as having successful practice in supporting social workers. Inspectors undertook the visits to these local authority areas between July and September 2011. The authorities covered a variety of demographic features and population size, and included London boroughs, shire counties and metropolitan authorities. Focus groups were held with senior managers, social workers, team managers and representatives of partner agencies. In total, inspectors met with more than 130 front-line social workers, over 115 managers and more than 137 representatives of partner agencies during the survey visits.

6. Local authorities were asked to identify two children or young people who had recently ceased to be subject to a child protection plan and for whom outcomes had improved. In total 38 children from 28 families were identified and inspectors were able to talk with nine of them. During the survey visit inspectors also spoke with 29 parents from 24 families about their experiences of being helped. They explored the child's journey through discussions with the child's social worker, their team manager and the chair of the child protection conference involved with the child or young person. Aspects of the child's electronic case record were also reviewed.
7. Prior to the survey visit social workers and first line managers completed a questionnaire relating to the different types of support they received. This was completed by 483 social workers and 163 managers and advanced or senior practitioners in 13 local authorities, although not every respondent answered every question. One authority did not participate as it had very recently undertaken a similar exercise for itself. Key issues that emerged from the questionnaire findings were further explored during the survey visits. An annex of the responses is found at the end of this report.
8. Analysis of the questionnaire responses confirmed that the large majority of social workers and managers made the link between the quality of support they received and the effectiveness of their practice. Of the social workers and managers who responded to this question, 76% and 78%, respectively, thought that the quality of support they received enabled them to work more effectively. Additionally front-line staff had a very clear understanding about those features of effective support that they valued the most and had a high degree of consensus about the key challenges that faced them in improving outcomes for children and young people.

## **The impact of effective support**

9. Inspectors found a high degree of consensus among front-line staff from all the local authorities about how they were effectively supported and the impact that this had on them and the children, young people and families they worked with. Front-line staff enjoyed, and were proud of, their work. Social workers from a diverse range of backgrounds felt empowered in their work and had enormous

goodwill towards senior leaders. They valued close scrutiny of their work and saw this, rather than autonomy, as integral to the exercise of professional judgement. One social worker commented, 'they've invested in me and I'm invested in them'. Being well supported reduced anxiety and enabled workers to be child-focused. Knowing that they were going to be challenged stimulated social workers to challenge their own practice. It assisted them to be very clear about the direction of their child protection work and to make better-evidenced risk assessments and decisions. They felt contained and safe and determined to enable positive change. They were better able to manage the gap between organisational requirements and parents' expectations. They were more confident and translated this into their practice.

10. Being well supported enabled social workers to use their authority and power thoughtfully in children and young people's interests. They were honest and clear with parents about what had to change. Having experienced being valued themselves, they were able to recognise parents' strengths and achievements. They identified and tackled drift in planning. They were motivated to ensure that outcomes improved and used their authority to challenge a lack of cooperation. One worker commented that, 'it gives us confidence to deliver clear messages to families'. Families responded to this by trusting that workers had their best interests at heart and this stimulated a motivation for change. Front-line staff were able to describe the positive outcomes that had led to plans being safely discontinued and there was agreement between staff and parents about the key changes that had occurred.
11. Inspectors identified that outcomes for the 38 children and young people whose cases were tracked during survey visits improved in a number of areas. Not all outcomes applied in each instance, but taken collectively these successful child protection plans enhanced children and young people's safety and well-being in a number of important ways.
12. Children's health, hygiene and behaviour improved as did their school attendance and punctuality and they were able to make better progress. Younger children's language development accelerated and they caught up with their developmental milestones. Children and young people's sense of identity and security improved through enabling absent fathers or protective relatives to resume contact with them. Their worries, anxieties and emotional distress were reduced when given the opportunity to talk with social workers and/or therapists about their feelings and as they saw a parent's behaviour changing. The overall impact on children and young people was that they no longer experienced abuse or neglect and they became less anxious and happier.
13. Parents gained insight into their day-to-day parenting which enabled them to be more reliable and less confrontational with their children. They improved home conditions and children lived in cleaner, tidier and more comfortable homes into which they felt more able to invite their friends. Some parents left abusive partners or ceased contact with men posing serious risks. Consequently children were no longer exposed to domestic abuse and were physically and

emotionally safer. Some parents reduced or ceased their misuse of alcohol and/or drugs and this created more consistent and secure parenting which enabled children to feel safer. Families were offered stable accommodation which reduced both parental and children's anxieties and improved their security as a family.

## Features of effective support

14. A three-year programme of inspections of safeguarding and looked after children services is currently under way. So far, these inspections have identified that good or outstanding local authorities share a number of common characteristics in the way that they support front-line social workers. In particular:
- visible and accessible senior managers create and sustain supportive organisational cultures within which service development is influenced by front-line staff
  - effective recruitment and retention strategies result in a sufficient number of staff, stable teams and opportunities for career progression
  - social workers have manageable caseloads and the flow of work is monitored well
  - expectations and accountabilities of front-line staff are clear and their performance is monitored, audited and evaluated
  - social workers receive focused and regular supervision
  - good-quality, relevant learning and development opportunities are provided
  - partnership working is embedded at all levels.
15. In this survey inspectors found that the most effective authorities take a systemic and holistic approach to supporting social workers, recognising that the components of effective support are interdependent and that the most effective support is provided when they are all aligned. When implemented together they formed 'virtuous circles' of support and practice, and each aspect of provision added value to the others.
16. While no single local authority in the survey had fully achieved all of these, they were collectively on the same journey towards the kinds of 'effective local systems' described in the final report of the Munro review of child protection *A child-centred system*.<sup>6</sup>
17. The way in which these supports interacted and mutually reinforced each other was particularly important. Social workers recognised this: 'it's the whole

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<sup>6</sup> *The Munro review of child protection*, Department for Education, 2011; [www.education.gov.uk/munroreview](http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview).

package that's important', and were often reluctant to single out one form of support as more significant than another. The following case study illustrates the combined effects of different forms of support.

### **Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea**

The social worker for this child had known the child and parent from the point of referral. They continued to work with the family through the child protection plan and afterwards.

The social worker received extensive support throughout the life of the plan, namely:

- access to informal and formal supervision that enabled the social worker to acknowledge the parent's initial reluctance to identify the extent of their alcohol misuse and to understand the impact of early life experiences on current parenting
- the line manager's direct involvement at key points, including chairing core group meetings and completing visits during the social worker's leave
- an opportunity to undergo lengthy training on domestic abuse at the same time as undertaking this work
- engagement with other professionals who communicated their understanding of the needs of the child effectively
- access to specialist assessment to focus on parental capacity to create sustained change
- senior managers who agreed to fund the parent's attendance at a second alcohol reduction programme
- the extended family were prepared to communicate their concerns.

The social worker was able to blend, integrate and apply their learning from all these sources. The impact of this was that the social worker was able to successfully challenge and engage the parent who had not acknowledged the risks to their child. The social worker enabled the parent to leave an abusive relationship and the trust they engendered was important in supporting the parent to significantly reduce their alcohol consumption. The protection plan has now ended.

18. All components made an important contribution to the effective support of front-line staff, but the culture of the organisation was the foundation from which other strategies were developed and sustained.

### **Supportive organisational cultures**

19. Evidence from this survey suggested that a number of shared dimensions characterised supportive organisational cultures. Local authorities emphasised different aspects, but collectively the cultures that were shaped and created were defined by:

- a clear vision focused on improving outcomes for vulnerable children that was communicated to and understood by staff
  - strong political and corporate support
  - leadership from visible and active senior managers who modelled the required behaviours
  - a learning and listening approach
  - shared ownership and shared responsibility for risk management and complex decisions.
20. Senior managers had clear views about the types of organisations they created or were in the process of creating which were sometimes expressed in writing, for example through a 'collective leadership pledge'. All paid careful attention to communicating this vision and to ensuring that they were closely in touch with front-line staff. There was a high degree of congruence in most authorities visited between what senior managers described and front-line staff explained that they experienced. Additionally, senior managers actively worked to replicate the internal organisational culture in their relationships with partner agencies.
21. Senior managers emphasised the importance of 'engaged and interactive' strong corporate and political leadership which enabled them to drive forward improvements. The chief executive in one local authority set a culture of 'no surprises'; was actively engaged in understanding nuances of performance; and held a series of themed discussions and open debates about particularly difficult issues to which partner agencies and all first line managers were invited. Other authorities stressed the importance of having active, well informed and engaged lead members who kept in close touch with front-line staff and had a deep understanding of the business.

#### **Lincolnshire County Council – the social work forum**

Lincolnshire County Council established a social work forum to address the challenge of direct communication between front-line social workers and senior managers in a large local authority covering a wide geographical area. The forum met monthly in venues across the county with representation from front-line managers and practitioners. The meeting was chaired by a team manager and received good administrative support.

The purpose of the forum was to discuss current issues and to make recommendations for fulfilling the potential and raising the morale of the social care workforce in Lincolnshire. There was a clear commitment from senior managers to listen and respond to the issues raised by the forum.

Discussions at the forum have influenced the development of an advanced practitioner role in Lincolnshire and the provision of learning and development opportunities for social workers. The forum has also

improved responsiveness to equality and diversity issues and produced questions for the authority's annual social work survey. Plans are also in place to develop a social work 'blog' on the local authority's intranet to stimulate and capture social workers' views on current issues.

22. High expectations were explicitly expressed through written standards and policies, together with clearly delineated roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. However, as these expectations were framed within a culture of support, staff experienced them as enabling and motivating rather than as unreasonably demanding and undermining of their professional judgement.
23. All of the local authorities visited paid very careful attention to creating relationship-based cultures. These were variously described as 'care giving' 'nurturing' and 'being human'. There was an emphasis on mutual respect and recognition of the emotional impact of the work. This was in direct contrast to what Professor Munro described as blame cultures within which social workers feared criticism and became defensive in their practice. Sustained efforts were made to ensure that front-line staff were valued for good work through face-to-face and electronic communications. Staff appreciated emails that congratulated them on an assessment and which explained why it was a good piece of work. Some authorities held celebrations of good practice. Senior managers in several of the authorities emphasised their 'open door', their wish to be kept in touch: 'tell me what's going on', and the importance of being informed about problems in a timely way. One social worker commented 'they know what it's like to be me'.
24. A feature across all the local authorities was the extent to which more senior managers demonstrated support through sharing responsibility for risk management and difficult decisions. In one authority a social worker had particularly valued the actions of a senior manager who 'stood up for my right to be safe' by speaking immediately with a parent whose behaviour had been threatening.
25. Senior managers also provided other forms of support through chairing the authority-wide panels set up to review and scrutinise planning and decision-making and through the allocation of scarce resources. They also became directly engaged in assisting workers in challenging situations. This in turn made it more likely that their staff would turn to them for help when experiencing difficulties rather than carry on when feeling uncertain or unsure.

A social worker was searching for a placement for a young mother and her baby who was subject to a child protection plan. Her team manager was on leave. None of the local placements that had been considered had been able to provide the focused attention that the mother and child needed. The social worker described how senior managers had worked alongside her to locate the external placement that would best meet the identified needs. She described this help, which took place over one afternoon as 'fantastic'.

The opportunity to build relationships with senior managers at a critical point through shared activity in a pressured situation gave the social worker confidence in them as people and as managers and she stated that she felt able to approach them for help in the future. The impact for the mother and baby was that the mother received skilled support to learn to parent her baby and the child thrived in his earliest days. The mother is still in contact with the foster carer and sees her as an ongoing source of support.

26. Senior managers across several local authorities had created specific mechanisms such as surveys and face-to-face meetings to enable staff to contribute to service development. One authority engaged staff in a 'big social work conversation' to enable discussion of relevant topics. Social workers and managers described how the opportunities that the 'conversation' provided enabled them to collectively tackle thorny issues and influence service development. They felt very confident that issues they raised would be addressed.
27. Timely and relatively small changes often had very positive impacts. For example, one group of staff who were being challenged to develop evidence-based practice complained that the level of support was insufficient as they lacked access to books and research. The senior manager responded quickly by starting a library of core texts and taking out a subscription to a web-based information service.
28. A common theme was the importance of swift problem-solving to demonstrate to staff that their views were important. One senior manager commented that 'culture can be unravelled if actions don't mirror promises'. Senior managers' involvement in the analysis of challenging problems helped front-line staff to appreciate that some problems would require longer-term solutions and to trust that managers would do what they could to bring about improvements.
29. High challenge was embedded in organisational cultures through a number of audit and evaluation mechanisms. One local authority described their 'culture of positive scrutiny' through which they were 'obsessively focused on detail'. Another described a 'strong, rigorous environment of challenge'. Front-line staff were clear that scrutiny made them feel less anxious, safer and more confident. Some staff explained the positive impact on their practice when senior managers, in signing-off reports, had sensitively enabled them to understand the weaknesses in a particular piece of work.
30. A few of the local authorities visited had undergone a process of deliberate transformation of organisational culture in order to better support their front-line staff. This drive was preceded by adverse inspection outcomes or the recognition that a changing local context and demand required a new approach. Inspectors identified that this required determination and persistence and was underpinned by detailed planning and review. This included initially focusing on ensuring that all staff adhered to clearly defined practice standards,



followed by concentrating on driving up performance by focusing on improving the quality of assessment and planning. In this way practice across the authority became consistently good, and all staff understood the value of good performance. Skilled social work managers were needed to drive through the transformation which involved:

- clarity about the desired end goal and/or the quality of practice that would be required
- consistent messages to staff that instilled a sense of pride and hope and engendered the belief that 'things will get better'; 'it is going to be okay, keep talking to me, keep telling me the problems'
- honesty about the reasons why change was needed, including acknowledgement that practice was not yet of an acceptable standard
- open dialogue with partners about poor practice and the absolute importance of their accompanying the local authority on their improvement journey
- management of anxiety and fear of failure.

## **Professional supervision**

31. Supervision and line management support were overwhelmingly cited as the most important types of support that improved outcomes for children and young people.
32. Senior managers played an important role in facilitating a strong supervision culture through:
  - clear standards and policies
  - ensuring that supervision was well resourced
  - modelling the behaviours required of effective supervisors, including acknowledging their own struggles
  - scrutinising and challenging plans and decisions
  - providing well-timed training for first line managers
  - access to independent staff counselling services
  - systematic audit of supervision practice.
33. In three of the local authorities visited senior managers had reviewed their supervision arrangements in response to feedback. They had reduced the number of social workers each team manager supervised to five or six. One authority had been able to achieve this at no additional cost through converting a vacancy at another level into an additional team manager post and redistributing the current complement of social workers to create an additional team. In conjunction with this they had increased the required frequency of supervision from monthly to fortnightly. This arrangement was highly valued by

staff who found that 'we don't skim the surface' as they had sufficient time to undertake in-depth reflective case discussions during supervision sessions. These generated achievable strategies and actions which they were confident could be achieved before their next supervision meeting.

34. Across all the local authorities visited inspectors found a high degree of consensus between social workers and first line managers about their experiences of effective supervision. They needed and wanted a balanced approach of high support (what has been going well and why) and high challenge (what could be better and how). The importance of regular, dedicated, uninterrupted and private time together with a genuinely shared agenda based on realistic expectations was identified across all authorities as the necessary framework within which all other supervision activity takes place.
35. There were three key points in a child's journey through the child protection system, each occurring before a key point in multi-agency decision-making, at which social workers needed to be highly challenged and supported:
  - making a decision that a child protection plan is necessary
  - making and agreeing the content of the plan
  - the decision to discontinue the plan.
36. Caseloads were managed and prioritised in order to allow workers to manage crises or to get to know children in large sibling groups to make assessments of the different levels of risk for each. Stable workforces over time meant that line managers had often built up direct knowledge of extended families or parents as children. Workers found their ability to contextualise history very helpful.
37. Managers also enabled staff to 'sound off' without judging them and were willing to acknowledge pressures and to appreciate effort and good work. This engendered the trust which enabled staff to be open and honest and made them feel reassured about their competence. Staff highly valued line managers who 'had the human touch' and 'share the load'. This genuine approach was accompanied by careful listening to what was and was not said along with challenging questions which enabled a different perspective to be taken. Some front-line staff also emphasised their own responsibility and contribution to the process as recipients of supervision.
38. The importance of line managers systematically requiring workers to review plans and actions was highlighted by case tracking. In one example a team manager stressed that a situation of longer-term neglect was going to require slower and incremental work to sustain change. More experienced workers valued the flexibility that managers demonstrated, especially when their manager had a good understanding of their style and abilities. Plans were often reformulated following supervision, most notably in response to the recognition that risk was escalating.

39. The importance of the direct involvement of the line manager in working with families was also highlighted. Line managers were directly involved by:
- attending child protection conferences, particularly the initial conference and at the point it was beginning to become appropriate to consider ending the plan
  - chairing core group meetings
  - undertaking joint work with social workers at times of crisis or stress or to enable a fuller assessment
  - undertaking unannounced or other visits during periods of leave or social workers' absence.
40. This direct involvement with social workers and families also provided line managers with the opportunity to observe and analyse practice and form their own judgements about the robustness of assessments and plans. This was especially important in cases where parents had not engaged with the child protection plan.
41. In just under a third of cases, parents did not engage with previous support plans or the current child protection plan. These situations created anxiety for front-line staff who acknowledged that this was a particularly critical point at which they needed to be supported effectively. Social workers required support to carefully analyse the factors impeding progress and to discuss their own worries and fears. The following case study illustrates sensitive work to help parents to successfully engage with plans.

A one-year-old boy was made subject of a child protection plan as a result of neglect. His young mother had a long history of involvement with children's social care and was described as autistic. Her two older children were cared for by family members.

The social worker took over work with the child during the plan at a point where his mother denied that there was any reason for involvement. The social workers took time to engage her, using pictures and diagrams to explain why her son was subject to a plan and what needed to change. Extended family members were involved in this work.

The team manager had a good knowledge of the mother as she had worked with her as a teenager. The manager encouraged the social worker to spend time in painstaking engagement and to identify small signs of positive change. The manager worked directly with health agencies to address their concerns and seek shared solutions. Team members offered different perspectives which reassured the social worker that she was doing all that was possible.

The conference chair was consulted about an initial lack of progress and postponed a planned review of the plan to send a 'letter of concern' to the

mother about the risks that her son continued to be exposed to. The mother responded positively to this authoritative, clear communication and the impact was that she began to positively engage and change rapidly took place. The child's development accelerated, home conditions improved and the mother actively sought counselling support.

42. It was clear across the local authorities surveyed that the combined effects of all the actions taken to engage parents helped to produce clearly evidenced, realistic and shared decisions which were linked to clear targets and plans. The impact on staff was that the anxiety involved in managing risk was reduced, situations felt less overwhelming and self-confidence to deal with difficult situations was strengthened. One manager described this as 'being safe to be stuck'.
43. Many local authorities commented that some recordings of supervision did not do justice to the quality of the professional discussions that had occurred, with the result that there was an incomplete account of how decisions were made, what options had been explored and how possible explanations of issues arising in families had been developed. One authority had recently commissioned training to improve the recording of critical analysis. Another local authority had used audit as a tool to improve the quality of analysis and its recording.

#### **North Tyneside Council – the use of critical reflection and its recording**

The use of critical reflection was well evidenced in North Tyneside. Social workers showed a good understanding of the concept and could describe its consistent use in their supervision. Reflective practice was clearly explained and prioritised within the authority's supervision policy. Managers also modelled a critically reflective approach to work with children and families and in addressing a range of service issues.

However, external evaluation and the authority's own audits indicated that supervision records did not consistently demonstrate the use of reflective practice. To examine this, a fieldwork manager directly observed the supervision practice of front-line managers. This confirmed that all managers understood and were applying critically reflective techniques but not all were using these to the same standard, and that good practice was not routinely captured in the supervision record.

In response, the authority provided development sessions to improve managers' individual use of reflective practice, and revised its supervision pro forma to ensure that the key components of a reflective discussion were captured. This included what was agreed and why, which other options were considered and what was learnt. Senior managers also introduced annual observed supervision sessions which were intended to enable a fuller assessment of the quality of supervision. Early evidence

suggested that the revised pro forma was assisting managers to record reflective practice effectively.

## Critical reflection

44. The process of reflection is used extensively in social work as a method of understanding, exploration, analysis and action planning. It was crucially important that critical reflection occurred in the context of a good working relationship within which staff felt respected. Managers described how they adapted their approach depending on their evaluation of the worker's experience and their approach to using evidence and theory. The importance of mutuality was stressed as a two-way process of challenging and being challenged. Several managers emphasised the importance of staff being 'able to come up with their own answers'.
45. Asking the right questions in the right way was strongly valued and staff shared with inspectors some of the questions which enabled them to feel less anxious or 'stuck'. One manager described this as 'asking the questions you don't want to answer, and pushing until you do'.
  - 'What's the worst-case scenario?'
  - 'What could happen tonight?'
  - 'How might that have had a different result?'
  - 'Why is this the best way of doing things?'
  - 'What else was going on for you then?'
  - 'What could we do differently to make a small improvement?'
46. The use of deceptively simple questions such as 'why?' often led to the development of new insights. Managers acted as a 'devil's advocate' which helped to surface weaknesses in analysis. A few staff stated that role playing a scenario was of benefit.
47. Critical reflection flourished well when it was formally enabled by organisational culture. One local authority had developed the post of 'family support and child protection adviser'. Two very experienced advisers provided independent consultation and advice outside of line management arrangements to support the development of professional judgement and the management of risks. Consultations were recorded in detail on the authority's electronic social care record. The effectiveness of the role was evaluated through the outcomes of case and thematic audits which asked specific questions about the effects of consulting with the advisers. Child protection conferences were used to capture the impact of consultation on outcomes for children. Direct feedback from staff was also used.
48. In a small number of the children's cases a critical point was reached when line managers and social workers realised that multi-agency child-in-need plans had

not resulted in improved outcomes. At this point the use of a tool to engender critical reflection was of great benefit. One local authority had developed a mechanism to enable staff to progress work that was not achieving the desired outcomes. Staff experienced this attention to the situations that were causing them the most concern as empowering and anxiety reducing.

### **London Borough of Wandsworth – critical reflection**

The authority took seriously the value of enabling practitioners to test their assumptions, examine different approaches, and move forward when they felt 'stuck' in working with children for whom there were child protection concerns. The children's cases often involved complex relationships and family dynamics. The development of a 'reflecting space' capacity was a formal expression of this. Developed by local managers, 'reflecting space' was based on current research, supported by contact with other locations engaged in similar work.

Social workers could select one of the available sessions each month to present a case with their peers as the 'reflecting team'. Ways forward were taken back into formal supervision to inform decision-making. Practitioners were then encouraged to spread the practice approach by becoming members of the widening 'reflecting team'.

The framework of management supervision also promoted this approach, as the recording of supervision required a formal reflection on each case being considered.

## **Managing the emotional impact of the work**

49. Front-line social work staff are exposed to powerful emotions on a day-to-day basis. The interviews with parents undertaken during this study highlighted the challenges in assisting parents to overcome their longstanding negative perceptions of social workers which sat alongside distress about the possibility of losing their children. Social workers needed to be emotionally resilient and to be able to use their emotional reactions positively to assist in analysis and assessment. Inspectors further explored how staff managed the emotional impact of their work.
50. Social workers in one local authority identified the importance of planning through the use of 'well-being' sheets that were completed before supervision and which assisted in ensuring that this aspect of support was given priority. It was also important to social workers that managers were proactive and used their emotional antennae to prompt them to ask how they were feeling in general and in relation to specific pressures and situations, 'they know you well and identify [your issues] before you do...'. Workers across all authorities visited described a process that was not always easy to engage with and could provoke anxiety, but which provided an important safety valve. One social worker judged their experience as effective because it was 'safe to cry'. Several

staff across different authorities described the impact on them as feeling contained, held and safe.

51. The most effective managers were described as calm, emotionally strong and as 'staying with you all of the way'. They set clear boundaries and gave permission for emotions such as anxiety, fear and dislike to be acknowledged and their meanings explored. One social worker commented, 'I can share the feelings I'm ashamed of having.' Managers employed a number of different strategies to help staff to process their emotional reactions. It was important to staff that managers remained calm and:
- 'remember what it's like to be you' (from a newly qualified worker)
  - acknowledge a difficulty and its associated anxiety and in so doing model for staff how to discuss feelings
  - 'enable you to name a feeling and "break down" the reasons for my feeling'
  - 'reassure you that it's acceptable to feel this way'
  - paid attention to 'what they are not being told'
  - turned concerns into plans.
52. The following case study illustrates the importance of recognising the impact of life experiences on practice and how as a consequence, by doing the basics well, a member of staff was empowered in her work with a family.

### **Managing the emotional impact of the work**

An experienced social worker returned to work following a period on maternity leave. Soon after returning she attended a child protection conference where the decision was taken to cease the child protection plan. The conference was challenging and highly charged as the mother of the children concerned made a very emotional statement about her experiences which had, at times, been very distressing. The social worker found the emotional impact of the mother's feelings difficult to deal with in relation to her own situation.

In supervision, the worker's line manager was able to facilitate a discussion which centred on the social worker's feelings. By showing empathy and understanding the manager enabled the social worker to explore and separate the feelings she had about her personal situation and those relating to work. They discussed the importance of a work-life balance, and by asking searching and open-ended questions the manager allowed the social worker to reflect on, and engage, her personal coping skills.

Following this discussion the social worker stated that she felt more confident to deal with her feelings and more able to work successfully with the mother. This helped the mother to understand the positive changes

she had made in the context of an improving family life for her children. After the plan ceased the family were well supported through the 'team around the child' framework.

53. The impact of support on first line managers and social workers in helping them deal with their feelings also brought benefits for the wider multi-agency group working with the child, as social workers were able to use the help that they had received in supervision to mirror this approach with partner agencies.

A baby was made subject of a child protection plan following a decision by the Family Proceedings Court to make a supervision order.

At the time the child protection plan was initiated the mother was pregnant with her second child. The parents were very willing to cooperate but given the seriousness of the injuries sustained and a degree of uncertainty as to how exactly these had occurred, anxieties about the level of risk were high.

Senior managers ensured that they had a detailed understanding of the case. The team manager described how her supervisor carefully listened to her concerns, paid close attention to detail, reviewed the protection plan and emphasised that risks were owned and shared by managers. The team manager described how this 'settled her' and made her feel confident that a robust safety net was in place.

The experienced social worker was honest about her worries about what might happen 'if anything went wrong'. She described how the team manager enabled her to 'keep the child at the centre of my thinking, not my anxieties and fears'. The team manager paid careful attention to the quality of the protection plan. Joint meetings with the senior manager reassured her and she felt 'my manager and senior managers were around me so I could be safe and confident in being the lead player around the child'. As a consequence she 'got on with the job'.

The social worker's sense of safety enabled her to support those colleagues from partner agencies who were also anxious about the level of risk. She described using similar techniques to acknowledge the feelings contained in remarks such as 'let's hope it works'. She emphasised to partners the level of senior management support and the robust nature of the plan. She was also able to enlist the support of partners who knew the family well to put forward alternative views of the family's strengths.

The parents understood why there was a high level of concern. They demonstrated that they were able to safely care for both their children who were thriving and well attached to both parents at the point the plan was discontinued. The parents continued to remain actively engaged with services for a further 10 months.



54. Social workers and team managers placed a high value on informal access to their managers. The opportunity to reflect on distressing and significant events as soon as possible afterwards was in some respects even more important than formal supervision such as planned sessions. Although clearly these informal episodes were of importance, they were less likely to be recorded, meaning that key decisions which could change the course of work were not clearly evidenced in case records.
55. Senior managers in one local authority explained the importance of 'holding' staff and this was reflected by their staff talking about the containment that they experienced. In one local authority two senior practitioners, who did not have their own caseloads, were employed to 'walk the floor' offering advice and guidance and were able to respond quickly when staff were struggling.
56. It was notable that parents valued dimensions in their relationships with social workers which were similar to those that social workers valued in their relationships with line managers: openness, honesty, clarity, appreciation and recognition of effort.

## Recruitment and retention

57. Front-line staff explained that a core part of feeling supported was the experience of working in stable teams with equally competent colleagues. Their managers had made long-term financial commitments to recruitment and retention and as a result the local authorities visited were generally fully staffed, with a low turnover and minimal use of agency staff. A number of successful strategies were used to recruit staff:
  - sub-regional research and benchmarking to compare the local 'offer' with other authorities
  - rolling recruitment programmes and processes to ensure that vacancies were quickly filled
  - rigorous interview processes which ensured that only those staff with the required competence would be appointed
  - close relationships with higher education institutions to provide high-quality placements and attract social work graduates
  - trainee schemes for high calibre external recruits and current employees of the service
  - 'return to social work' initiatives.
58. A few authorities in the survey sample had historically experienced the need to employ high numbers of agency staff. One local authority had sought to capitalise on this.

**Buckinghamshire County Council – employing agency workers to permanent posts**

Due to historically high vacancy rates Buckinghamshire had become dependent on a number of long-term agency workers at significant cost to the authority. As part of a strategy to make the most cost-effective use of their skills the authority offered individual interviews with all agency workers who had demonstrated competence through their work in Buckinghamshire. These interviews were used to explore the pros and cons of agency work versus working for Buckinghamshire using the worker’s individual circumstances.

As a result of this exercise many agency workers concluded that the benefits of employment with Buckinghamshire outweighed those of continuing as an agency worker and converted to permanent employment. This proactive approach combined with a successful recruitment strategy has created a much more stable workforce with low vacancy levels and agency usage concentrated on covering short-term gaps.

59. Several authorities ensured that they supported their staff through well established and successful ‘grow your own schemes’ which offered unqualified staff the opportunity to gain a professional qualification and ensured a steady recruitment of staff to replace those who moved on.
60. All of the areas visited had developed a range of specific strategies to ensure that staff would remain working with the local authority. Social workers and managers emphasised that although financial reward may have been a part of what attracted them to a local authority, other elements of support such as working in a supportive team, a sense of belonging, and for managers the respect and autonomy they enjoyed, were far more likely to ensure that they stayed.
61. The key shared feature was the focus on timely, flexible, well resourced and supported career progression pathways which in the most developed authorities enabled staff to move from unqualified worker to team manager. One authority had facilitated career development by supporting staff to gain a broad range of experiences.

**Plymouth City Council – staff moves protocol**

The staff moves protocol promoted a learning culture that involved sharing best practice and knowledge. It was developed to promote the retention of staff through providing opportunities to broaden their skills and experience and to encourage closer working relationships.

Social workers and family support workers were employed with generic role profiles. Supervision and appraisal were used to identify where it would benefit a staff member’s professional development if they gained experience of working in a different area of the service. If there were

concerns about performance no moves could take place. Staff completed a personal statement which was endorsed by their manager and the service manager.

The staff member might then move to a different area of the service, provided that there were vacancies available. The service manager oversaw negotiations between all concerned to highlight the developmental aspects of the move. In some circumstances reciprocal moves were arranged.

Staff feedback was positive, indicating the benefits to morale, motivation, career prospects and professional knowledge. One staff member commented, 'we have had motivated people join the team, they have improved energy and team morale'.

## Teamworking

62. The crucial role of the social work team in supporting staff has been strongly highlighted through this survey. Teams provide practical, emotional and intellectual support. The key distinguishing features are mutuality, 'all for one and one for all' and 'we know we need each other' and reciprocity, 'we've got each other's backs [covered] all the time'. Across all survey authorities there was very strong consensus that the team is important because it provides access to:
- shared identity, 'I'm not alone'
  - shared expertise and problem-solving
  - a sense of belonging
  - immediate release for feelings, 'we can come back from a visit and offload or "rant"'
  - appreciation for the team member's skills
  - realism about an individual's work through a fresh set of eyes
  - help to reduce felt pressure and anxiety, 'we lighten the mood'.
63. Team members had high expectations of the support they could provide for each other. Differences such as those arising from age and ethnic background were also appreciated and valued. Teams were also able to challenge each other through informal case discussion and joint working. However, it was the daily support and camaraderie that was most significant to front-line staff. Team managers played a pivotal role in setting cultures of high support. They used their understanding of individuals and the way they blended together as a group to make best use of the range of experience and knowledge to encourage, enable and problem solve, giving messages such as 'we'll find a way' or 'we can make it happen for families'. They set clear standards and expectations of behaviour and quietly challenged staff who were not meeting them. They used their positive working relationships with other managers to

create semi-permeable or collaborative boundaries between teams. Inspectors found examples of willing sharing and redistribution of cases, vacancies and staff across teams. Team members responded positively to these messages and across all local authorities there were a number of shared mechanisms to keep the culture of support alive and productive:

- tolerance of individual differences and 'quirks'
- knowledge of individual pressure points to recognise when someone needed help, often before they realised it
- ownership and interest in each other's work, 'these are our children'
- using food to develop team events and traditions
- use of team humour to relieve stress, 'we can laugh when work is grim'
- providing quiet, practical help; making a telephone call, arranging an appointment.

64. The impact of this on staff was vividly and consistently conveyed. Front-line staff in this survey described how collaboration not competition reduced anxiety and how informal discussion provided reassurance about feelings of inadequacy; for example, 'I feel that I'm doing the right thing.' Teamworking engendered optimism and a positive approach to work. Several staff said almost apologetically, 'I really look forward to coming to work' and several stressed that the support they received from their team was a key reason why they remained in their current post. Inspectors observed that the basic principles of equality and diversity practice, the valuing of difference and an understanding of how power was used, were put into practice appropriately.
65. Team colleagues helped each other to manage their emotions, in particular providing immediate support and a safe opportunity to 'vent' feelings before processing them. One local authority was taking steps to formalise the support that more experienced staff provided for newer colleagues.

### **City of York – the development of reflective peer consultation**

Following a recent service reorganisation, managers wanted to strengthen team relationships and make better use of the skills of experienced staff who already provided a good deal of informal support to their colleagues. Additionally an audit of supervision practice showed that the quality of reflection was not yet consistently embedded in all teams. Managers adapted a model developed by Tony Morrison that was already in use locally as its theoretical foundation was very similar to that underpinning the authority's revised supervision policy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> T Morrison, *Staff Supervision in Social Care*, Pavilion, 2005.

Staff were offered the opportunity to train as peer consultants to facilitate case discussions about complex cases. All team members were invited to participate.

The peer consultant was provided with a number of questions to prompt self-reflection in relation to:

- telling the story – exploring observations, feelings, thoughts and actions
- thoughts and feelings about the story – exploration of feelings and their perceptions about what service users were feeling
- understanding the story – analysis of assumptions, needs, risks, and power relationships
- the next chapter – agreeing plans and actions – clarifying responsibilities, identifying outcomes along with realistic and practical actions and the necessary degree of urgency and how success will be measured
- the importance of keeping the child at the centre of reflection - one member of the group was asked to particularly consider the situation from the child's perspective.

The model was in its early stages of development so as yet there is no evaluative evidence of the impact of this form of support on front-line staff and outcomes for children and young people.

66. Inspectors also identified the impact of these collaborative and supportive approaches on outcomes for children. They provided consistency, particularly during periods of leave and sickness. Many teams had developed processes to ensure that continuity of service to families was not disrupted. Some had buddying arrangements; in others emails and contingency summaries were used to request and generate offers of support. Crises and transitions were better managed as the skills and time of several colleagues were brought to bear to manage distressing events for children. Several parents also mentioned to inspectors the benefits of knowing team managers and other workers; they did not have to repeat their stories, unannounced visits were conducted by someone they knew and the level of challenge that their social worker provided was maintained consistently in their absence.
67. Senior managers provided an important contribution to teamwork through making available the physical and geographical environments within which collaboration could flourish. There is mixed evidence as to whether open plan offices assisted or hindered teamwork. Some staff pointed out the advantages of accessibility and visibility and the increased opportunities for making connections across teams. In particular the availability of team managers whose desks were all in the same area was valued, particularly when a team member's own manager was not available. Others emphasised the importance of a contained space and the difficulties of being overheard in some situations. However, there was strong consensus that 'hot desk' arrangements undermined

the ability of teams to offer support to their members and that it could make it more likely for individuals to opt out of team responsibilities. One local authority had recognised the unintended consequences of this and had subsequently given teams their own space and each worker their own desk. One focus group commented that their access to their own desk, mobile telephone and computer felt like a reflection of the extent to which they were valued as professionals.

## Managing performance

68. Inspectors explored how front-line staff were supported and challenged through performance management and quality assurance. Social workers were clear that when high performance was valued by their local authority and when expectations about their performance were explicit they felt more motivated to do their best. All local authorities identified a number of core mechanisms to audit, monitor and evaluate the quality of practice to ensure that social workers were carrying out the fundamentals well and consistently.
69. The most effective local authorities visited ensured that nuances and details in relation to performance were well understood. Findings from one aspect of performance were analysed in conjunction with others. While staff in many focus groups stressed the importance of line managers recognising their professional autonomy they also made it clear that a high level of scrutiny was necessary and affirming.
70. Senior managers also ensured that staff were supported to improve their practice by using local capability policies to closely manage performance and provide additional training. Where these measures failed to improve performance, local authorities were not afraid to follow through the capability procedures to dismissal. This was simultaneously accompanied by the recruitment of new staff who would be able and willing to respond to the challenges facing the authority.
71. In a few instances managers involved all staff in regular reviews within which critical reflection on performance and good practice was shared and celebrated. In one large authority senior managers and the lead member for children had developed a method of reviewing local performance.

### **Lincolnshire County Council – safeguarding assurance days**

On safeguarding assurance days, the Executive Member for Children’s Social Care, the Director of Children’s Services and Assistant Director made a full-day visit to a children’s social work team. During these visits they met with front-line practitioners, principal practitioners, and team managers. The days included observations of meetings, such as core groups, reviews and visits with social workers to families. The visit was a two-way process to allow senior managers and front-line teams to raise any issues, queries or concerns. The agreed aims were to promote open and honest dialogue between front-line teams and senior managers and

the executive in Lincolnshire and to provide an opportunity for senior managers and politicians to experience front-line practice.

Staff welcomed the opportunity to meet with senior managers and felt that the process enabled them to describe positive examples of practice as well as discuss and resolve issues that were impacting on their work. Senior managers and the Executive Member for Children’s Social Care reported that the process has improved their understanding and knowledge of front-line services and improved communication between senior managers and front-line staff.

72. All the local authorities undertook regular and systematic case audits. Many also supplemented these through regular thematic audits, often conducted alongside partner agencies. Inspectors were given examples of how action as a consequence of audit led to particular improvements in practice, and greater clarity in terms of expectations of performance. One authority had introduced an audit methodology that involved social workers as auditors as well as the subjects of audit.

**Halton Borough Council – audit of practice days**

Alongside performance review days and multi-agency case auditing, Halton undertook audit of practice days. Social workers were involved as recipients and as auditors. A cross-section of social care staff, including front-line social workers, met four times a year for two days to audit case files and practice. The inclusion of social workers reflected the authority’s emphasis on ownership of professional accountability.

The process has evolved to include an increasingly qualitative approach to auditing. The authority’s focus on evidence-based practice was reflected in the provision to auditors of relevant research. Audits involved an increased emphasis on ‘what difference does it make’ and on outcomes for children. Repeat audits of files audited 18 months previously have been undertaken to monitor the implementation of recommendations from audits. This confirmed that social workers were consistently recording the ‘child’s voice’ and evidence of outcomes achieved and their impact.

Individual social workers and their managers received written feedback following audits. Social workers reported feeling proud when good work was commended through audit. They saw it as an opportunity to develop their skills and casework and improve outcomes for the children they were working with.

All social workers were offered the opportunity to participate as auditors and they took responsibility for presenting the findings and outcomes of audit to their colleagues at departmental performance review days. Workers spoken to described how being an auditor had sharpened their own practice.

## Learning and development

73. In those local authorities that spoke most forcefully of a learning culture, line managers at all levels took solid ownership of the promotion and facilitation of learning; for example, the inclusion of instances of effective work as case studies in training courses. Gaps and weaknesses in performance were also targeted for training. Significantly, this was ownership integrated into day-to-day management activities through giving feedback and mentoring staff. One social worker explained how they were able to produce better-evidenced assessments for court as a result of a middle manager taking the time to explain how to better analyse information. Many other staff commented on the improvements made to written work as a result of clear feedback and described their pleasure when these improvements were recognised by senior managers in signing off subsequent work.
74. Senior managers' ownership of learning was also reflected in the extent to which managers in some local authorities identified learning needs and planned and delivered training. In one authority managers trained staff in a number of 'tools' for assessment and intervention and had clear expectations that these would be referenced in written reports which managers then evaluated through case audits. In some authorities managers had access to 'action learning sets' in which they explored current problems, identified solutions and agreed ways forward. In one authority a model was developed to better integrate learning with practice.

### **Hartlepool Borough Council – blended learning**

Managers worked as development partners with an external agency to develop a training model based on outcome-focused and child-centred case planning. It incorporated seminars from eminent practitioners and academics that were focused on policy developments and research findings, small group workshops and coaching sessions where practice strategies and tools were explored and tasks undertaken to apply learning in practice.

Seven modules had been developed which covered assessment, child-centred recording, planning, communication with parents/carers, motivating change, performance management and supervision. They were offered at four levels tailored to the needs of newly qualified practitioners through to senior managers.

Workshops and coaching sessions were customised to the needs of particular groups and employed a reflective style emphasising the use of 'curious questioning'.

The impact of the model on the standard of practice was evaluated through pre-training questionnaires, feedback from participants, audit of case files to identify how learning had been used in practice, interviews



with staff and their managers and with specialist workforce development staff. Practitioners were asked to contribute to seminars and present examples of effective application of learning in practice, which they stated had contributed well to their professional confidence.

75. Front-line staff across all local authorities offered many examples of the impact that training had had on their subsequent practice and how using new ideas or techniques had enabled them to move forward. They provided several examples of improved practice as a result of learning, such as closer attention to the role of fathers and other men in families, a more in-depth focus on attachment and better identification of risk factors. However, there was scope for authorities to further develop their systems for identifying the impact that training had on the quality of work with families and to what extent this was linked to improving outcomes for children and young people.
76. The evidence from this survey suggests that further consideration needs to be given to the learning needs of managers. Team managers across many local authorities were strongly committed to ensuring that their teams' learning needs were met but were less vocal about their own needs. Those managers who had access to tailored academically accredited training that was rooted in management practice and delivered through action learning sets were most able to clearly describe the impact on their management of performance and practice.

## Multi-agency working

77. Social workers and first line managers strongly valued the support and challenge that other agencies provided. One manager stated, 'we are collectively prepared to be critical of ourselves'. There was a high level of consensus among front-line staff that they felt best supported when agencies played a full part in child protection planning. One worker described this as 'minding the gap'. Inspectors noted a clear difference between expectations of support from team colleagues who helped front-line staff to manage themselves and support from partner agencies that helped to manage the work. Colleagues from partner agencies were most effective in supporting social workers through managing the work when they:
  - understood the child protection social worker's role; 'they know we don't have magic wands'
  - prioritised the child's needs above all else
  - shared the same understanding of desired outcomes for the child
  - accepted their accountability
  - effectively and regularly communicated their knowledge and intelligence
  - shared ownership of the work through full participation in all conferences and core groups

- conscientiously carried out the tasks and interventions that the protection plan assigned to them.
- 78. Those authorities that supported staff effectively used the same methods and routes to create supportive partnerships with external agencies as they did internally. Local authorities conveyed the importance of mutuality and reciprocity; one manager described this as 'enlightened self-interest'. Other authorities referred to giving messages: 'we can't do it alone'; 'this child needs you' and 'one workforce and our children and young people'.
- 79. Some local authorities stressed the importance of 'businesslike credibility' in their own operational practice as a significant feature in sustaining multi-agency support. This was confirmed by partner agencies who commented on the systematic returning of telephone calls and the quality of advice at the point of referral as important in enabling them to offer good support to children's social care as the lead agency in child protection planning.
- 80. Clear and agreed thresholds for access to services were fundamentally important as these provided a clear framework of expectations that was experienced as supportive. Inspectors were told of many small-scale initiatives to share expertise and improve communication. For example, the shadowing of referral and assessment services by GPs and health visitors; secondments and training placements; and shared inductions. In a few local authorities social workers were placed with the local police service or children's centres or became a part of multi-agency locality teams.

#### **North Tyneside Council – remodelling social work**

North Tyneside has operated one of the 'Remodelling Social Work' pilots sponsored by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). The pilot placed six qualified social workers and eight support workers within its early intervention locality teams.

This had generated a number of benefits, including the development of a more positive view of social workers within communities; better understanding of the social work role and skills; enhanced confidence of partners in the robustness and appropriateness of support for families provided outside a child protection framework; improved networking and expansion of the range of opportunities for social workers. The pilot was positively evaluated by the CWDC.

The impact of the project is that children and young people whose needs do not reach the thresholds for statutory assessment can now access a clear pathway to social work services through the common assessment process. As the benefits were convincing, North Tyneside council was planning to continue and expand the initiative stage by establishing social workers in all four of its locality teams.

81. Local Safeguarding Children Boards had a fundamental role in engendering effective partnership working. They supported training, organised multi-agency audits of practice and took on a mediating role in relation to areas of dispute.
82. Particular attention was paid to the identification of problems and resolution of conflicts that had the potential to undermine supportive and purposeful work. Clear protocols and escalation policies acted as backstops for this and sometimes senior managers in partner agencies acted as focal points for resolution. However, the main emphasis was on resolution of difference at the earliest stages and team managers played a crucial role in this. Honest dialogue that faced up to differences of opinion had resulted in improved services. For example, in two local authorities significant progress had been made in resolving issues of mutual concern in relation to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS); this had resulted in a number of valued initiatives that provided additional support to front-line staff, such as CAMHS link workers with each social work team and specialist safeguarding consultation clinics. In one authority multi-agency service improvement days, including up to 300 practitioners, were used to progress the developments most likely to lead to cross-agency practice improvements. Other authorities had developed multi-agency risk management panels that strengthened complex decision-making.

#### **Bracknell Forest – multi-agency risk management forum**

The multi-agency risk-management forum was designed to address the risks and needs of a relatively small number of usually older children who were vulnerable due to their own risk-taking behaviour; typically they were on the edge of care as their parenting arrangements tended to have limited or no impact on the risk-taking behaviours. The objective of the panel was to safely maintain these young people within their communities and to improve their resilience.

Referrals to the forum were made by children's social care. A typical forum would involve managers from social care, police, health, youth offending and education services. Key objectives were to identify the severity of risk, accept risk-management responsibility, and coordinate a plan that addressed the underlying causes to minimise the future risk of harm. Tight monitoring of the progress of the plan was undertaken at three- or four-weekly intervals.

The forum explicitly used current research and national models of practice and was linked to specialist intensive services such as the Family Improvement Programme, family group conferencing and parenting support. This approach was being evaluated to identify its effectiveness.

83. Inspectors were also presented with evidence of effective partnership working with local providers of higher education that benefited front-line staff and improved practice, through providing them with opportunities for in-depth learning and to better understand the evidence base of practice and research.

### **Bristol City Council – working in partnership with higher education institutions**

Bristol children’s social care developed a range of partnerships with local universities including Bristol, Bath and the University of the West of England. The arrangements involved practitioners, managers and academic staff.

The University of Bristol provided expert advisers at a strategic level: for example, a representative sat on the Corporate Parenting Panel, the Cross-Party Safeguarding Group and the Children’s Services Scrutiny Commission. As a result elected members’ knowledge and confidence have developed.

The University of Bristol School for Policy Studies offered consultation on the development of a kinship care policy. The impact of this is that better use is now made of families as carers.

Children’s social care staff co-authored, with the University of the West of England, a ‘best practice’ publication for students and practitioners and a joint research project exploring effective ways of building resilience in social workers was planned.

To complement the post-qualifying awards in childcare the University of Bristol was developing an accredited management training course that would include risk management.

The authority had annually provided around 35 social work placements, and employed practice coordinators who also identified placements in the children’s voluntary sector. Final year students who obtained employment in children’s services received a ‘golden handshake’.

The outcome of all this work was a mutually supportive working relationship that had benefited all organisations. The provision of evidence-based challenge and support had promoted continuous service improvement. Social workers and managers have increased their understanding of research and policy development through working alongside academics.

84. In several of the cases tracked, workers across agencies very effectively supported each other through joint pieces of work and jointly delivered difficult messages to parents. The impact for practice was that risk was more comprehensively analysed and more reliable decisions were made as these processes were underpinned by in-depth discussions that incorporated a range of perspectives.
85. Specialist services provided by partner agencies were pivotal in enabling changes in family functioning and this sharing of collective responsibility was seen as very supportive. Counselling for parents and therapeutic help for

children, often procured at considerable cost, made an important contribution to changing cognitive and emotional behaviour. Children and their parents recognised the role that other agencies such as schools, voluntary groups, therapists and out-of-school activities had played in providing help.

86. A particular challenge was sustaining partnership working with staff working primarily with adults. It was crucial that adult services staff perceived the child as of equal importance and more vulnerable than the parent. In one instance mental health services provided effective support when a mental health professional and a social worker visited together to deliver a jointly agreed response to a mother's threats of self-harm and the mental health worker arranged for the social worker to meet the mother's psychiatrist. The impact of this was that the social worker felt more knowledgeable and thus confident to change the way she had been reacting. The mother described the service and the worker as 'brilliant' and 'not black or white but in between'. She found that the focus was on her feelings and her behaviour 'week after week'. The worker asked 'deep questions' and persisted in asking 'why'. While the mother found this daunting she said that 'it gave me the courage to fight back'.

#### **Working with a multi-professional family intervention project**

A mother of two children aged under five explained that as a result of the persistent work of a family intervention project 'I told the truth about my drug use'. Her drug use and its impact on parenting along with domestic abuse had been the reason for making the child protection plan. The mother subsequently engaged fully in a drug treatment programme, and took every possible legal measure to protect the family from domestic abuse.

The quality of parenting improved as a consequence of the mother's increased emotional and physical availability to her children. The elder child's school attendance improved significantly and they began to make friends. Both children became less anxious and more animated and the rivalry between them decreased.

When asked what support social workers needed to work with families such as hers the mother thought it was 'massive'. It was important to give them more time to spend with families. This would help parents to be 'more natural' and 'more confident' with social workers.

87. Support from other agencies was of key significance when decisions were taken to discontinue child protection plans. The core group's discussions and analysis played an important role. In the cases studied disagreement about ending plans was comparatively rare but when it occurred it was taken seriously and faced. Conference chairs played an important role and some identified the importance of using yardsticks of what was reasonable and fair to expect in reviewing progress. However, some agencies were still anxious about losing the security that they thought a plan provided and in these instances the conference chair

had an important role in defining the value of stepping down to robust child in need plans within which agencies would continue to work on the same issues in the same way.

## The impact of effective support on the quality of care planning

88. Evidence from case tracking in this survey suggests that effective support to social workers is translated into effective support to families. Inspectors were able to identify how the characteristics of supportive relationships and planning were directly mirrored in working with parents. 'No-blame' cultures best facilitated this process as front-line staff were able to acknowledge mistakes or recognise the potential for errors of judgement and take corrective action without feeling that their reputation for doing good work would be damaged. This approach was mirrored in the way they approached families:

'The social worker helped me understand I could ask for help and would not get punished or judged for this. He gave me confidence and support.'

89. Parents to whom inspectors spoke were able to recognise how their cooperation and engagement was in itself supportive of social workers and the implementation of the care plan. One father explained:

'We tried hard to deal with everyone properly and when we were asked to do something we did it.'

90. The following case study illustrates the 'golden thread' linking support for staff to outcomes for children and young people.

A teenage girl had been subject to a child protection plan for over 18 months as a result of neglect in the context of domestic abuse and parental substance misuse. All agencies identified that the quality of parenting was not improving and were concerned about the young person's physical and emotional well-being and poor school attendance. A legal planning meeting had discussed the possibility of initiating care proceedings. A new social worker was allocated.

The service manager and a duty worker covered other aspects of the social worker's caseload to free up sufficient time for her to work with the family. The social worker described a sense of containment as her feelings and worries about the case were well managed and this in turn impacted on her ability to work positively with the family and promote change.

The stepfather, who had been misusing drugs, had left the family home and the domestic abuse had ceased. The social worker judged that the mother's parenting had improved and this was recognised. Through intensive one-to-one work with the mother and her daughter the social worker acknowledged their strengths and gained their confidence. The

social worker sought their views on issues of concern and the interventions that they felt could help, and shifted their sense of seeing themselves as 'the problem'. She was honest with the mother about the potential consequences if the situation did not improve.

Rather than focusing only on the young woman's refusal to accept help with her severe psoriasis and head lice, the social worker took a holistic approach. The considerable time spent engaging with the young woman enabled the social worker to reach an agreement with her that she needed help to build her self-esteem and confidence and this could only begin if she agreed to treatment, to which she then gave her consent.

As the mother's confidence developed she became more assertive with her children and was able to provide clear boundaries and support to her daughter to return to school.

The social worker described the range of support she received in this case from colleagues in her team, the child protection conference chair and the core group members. The most significant support was that of her line manager who was 'always available' to critically reflect on issues of risk and discuss the emotional impact of the work.

The mother also described how the social worker instilled confidence in her that she could parent well and this then had a positive impact on her relationship with her daughter. She portrayed the social worker as being reliable and 'always available at the end of a phone'. The mother stated that had the social worker not spent a considerable amount of time with her when she had separated from her partner she felt that she would have returned to what was an abusive relationship. As the mother's confidence grew so did that of her daughter.

Home conditions and the mother's parenting improved to such an extent that the young woman's protection plan was ended after five months. By this time she was free of psoriasis and head lice, and she had left the family home for the first time in many months. As she returned to school she began to develop positive relationships with her peer group.

## Evaluating the impact of effective support

91. Front-line staff clearly understood how support improved the quality of their child protection practice. For example, different initiatives to support staff to better record their evidence-based thinking were identified as effective by management activity and audit. Examples were also provided of cases moving more smoothly through court proceedings, of shorter and smarter child protection plans and of courts requiring fewer external independent assessments following the creation of internal teams to produce independent reports.

92. Evaluating the impact of support to front-line staff was most likely to be evidenced as part of the ongoing evaluation of the quality of practice and through proxy measures such as reductions in the proportion of repeat child protection plans.
93. Although local authorities carried out a number of activities to monitor and evaluate the quality of practice, the formal evaluation of the impact of support was rarely if ever undertaken. Some authorities acknowledged that formally measuring the impact of initiatives to support social workers was complex and that isolating the specific effects of particular initiatives from other variables was unlikely. However, inspectors found that opportunities were missed to fully evidence the financial and practice benefits that had accrued as a result of determined and persistent effort and investment.
94. Inspectors examined how local authorities measured changes in outcomes for children subject to child protection plans. Inspectors found variations across survey authorities in the extent to which child protection plans clearly identified what needed to be different for the child as a result of the plan. Forms did not always require staff to identify outcomes and it was clear that on occasions there was confusion between aims or objectives and required outcomes. Thus the extent to which the plans reviewed by inspectors were outcome-focused varied. Given that outcomes were not invariably defined at the outset, this had an effect on reviews of plans. Reviews clearly measured progress against actions but were less likely to record the impact that this had on reducing risks. In addition qualitative audits of practice did not always require auditors to comment on whether and to what standard outcomes had been identified, reviewed and recorded.
95. Senior managers in one local authority devoted considerable effort to ensure that staff had a theoretical understanding of outcome-based practice. This authority had adapted a practice guide to take front-line staff through the process of understanding what outcomes are, and how to define and review them. They had also incorporated an outcome focus in training and managers were offering specific feedback on the extent to which plans were outcome based. In their view this was a process of 'changing hearts and minds, not about putting a mark in the sand that this will be done'. Another authority was developing a model for better engaging families in the child protection process based on the 'signs of safety' approach.<sup>8</sup>
96. None of the survey local authorities had developed a process for recording, aggregating and evaluating outcomes across groups of children subject to child protection plans. Therefore the shared features of those plans which were successful or unsuccessful were not fully understood and thus could not be

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<sup>8</sup> The signs of safety approach was originally developed in Western Australia and is a comprehensive risk assessment of assessed families for risks/dangers and strengths/safety;  
<http://signsofsafety.net>.



systematically used as a basis for service improvement or the allocation of resources.

## **Overcoming challenges and barriers in improving outcomes for children and young people**

97. Social workers and team managers completing the questionnaire before the survey visits identified a number of barriers to improving outcomes, but by far the most important were a lack of resources, a lack of time to work with families and high caseloads. In contrast, first line managers identified difficulties in multi-agency working and the combined demands of recording and paperwork.
98. Within the local authorities visited a broad range of financial, strategic, systems and practice challenges was identified. The vast majority of authorities faced the twin challenges of rising demand while having to make budget reductions. Almost all had managed to protect resources for front-line child protection services; although in several local authorities administrative and other forms of support had been subject to reductions. One authority had managed to increase resources over the last 12 months by £2.5 million through the strength of evidence of rising demand alongside an increase in the local child population. This had been invested in early intervention provision and a reduction in the number of social workers supervised by each team manager.
99. Inspectors found that there was a high degree of consensus between senior managers, first line managers and social workers as to the nature of these challenges, reflecting the attention paid in many of the survey authorities to clear communication and involving staff in strategic and service developments. Given the current financial climate, solutions to challenges needed to be flexible, creative and achieved at low or no costs. Inspectors identified several key factors that assisted in the development and implementation of targeted solutions:
- time was devoted to the intelligent analysis of problems
  - corporate expertise was used to analyse and recommend options
  - senior managers listened to the experiences and struggles of front-line staff
  - front-line staff were involved in identifying the issues and generating solutions
  - senior managers carefully communicated the reasons for a lack of progress in resolving particularly difficult problems
  - partner agencies were willing to play a role in implementing solutions.
100. All local authorities were honest in stating that finding solutions to challenges was work in progress. In general, front-line staff appreciated this and accepted that there were 'wicked problems' that would take time and ingenuity to fully resolve.

## Using resources effectively and finding time to work with families

101. Evidence from this survey suggests that all of the features of effective support contribute towards using resources well and releasing time to work with families. Setting a child-centred and collaborative organisational culture, recruiting competent staff and supervising them well made it more likely that confident, efficient social workers with a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of their work would focus more precisely on addressing children's feelings and anxieties. When partner agencies took a full role in communication and planning, the time that social workers spent in checking that other agencies were carrying out expected tasks was reduced. Highly supportive teams pooled resources to manage crises and transitions more efficiently.
102. The time spent in assessing needs could be reduced through the introduction of modifications to information and communication technology (ICT) systems.

### City of York – E-Trak

The City of York's ICT system had been modified to combine several databases to provide a common view of a child. The Advice and Early Intervention team (A and EI) was able to search for the same child or family groups across:

- social care information (previous referrals, children looked after and children subject to child protection plans)
- educational databases (for example, schools, exclusion data, special educational needs data, education social work referrals and whether an assessment had been completed)
- youth offending data
- children's centres information.

E-Trak also acted as an electronic social care record. Staff in the A and EI team recorded their work against each child. This information was shared, with appropriate permissions. It detailed current and historical intervention with, and responses from, the family.

Information was integrated on an hourly basis to ensure its integrity and timeliness. The benefits were that accurate information about children's involvement with other agencies could be quickly ascertained, thus requiring fewer telephone calls and saving time. When aggregated across all referrals, the authority believed that this was significant.

103. Several local authorities were struggling with electronic social care records or information technology systems that staff found problematic to use and were in the process of replacing or significantly modifying them.
104. Many of the local authorities experienced challenges in providing sufficient administrative resources and inspectors saw examples of efforts to reduce costs

and improve efficiency; for example, through the pooling of administrative resources across teams, which front-line staff stated had increased their administrative workload. Senior managers were acutely aware of the possible unintended consequences of this and two local authorities had responded to the administrative demands of ICT systems by developing data support officers.

### **London Borough of Barnet – the role of data assistants**

Front-line staff could access a daily support 'surgery' to help them manage electronic case records. In response to issues raised by social workers a consultation was held to establish what type of support would release the most time. The post of data assistant was developed and piloted.

Three assistants were co-located with the five child in need teams. They inputted basic information, created duplicate records for newly identified siblings, compiled lists of attendees for conferences and reviews, scanned and uploaded documents and deleted duplicated files. They also produced additional performance information for managers.

The pilot had been regularly reviewed which resulted in modifications to forms for electronic records. Managers and data specialists worked together to deliver training in writing electronic chronologies. Feedback from front-line staff confirmed the positive benefit of the scheme in releasing time that could be spent with families. Quantification of the time saved was attempted but this proved too difficult to collate accurately. The scheme was now being formally adopted.

105. Family support staff often had a pivotal role in helping parents to develop more effective strategies to respond to their children. They were described by one social worker as 'our eyes and our ears'. Strengthening the role of these staff in managing contact arrangements for children whose cases were being considered by family proceedings courts had led to a reduction in social work time unnecessarily spent overseeing these arrangements.
106. Other local authorities had considered the time and costs involved in commissioning independent assessments and had developed alternatives.

### **Metropolitan Borough of Oldham – giving social workers sufficient time to make sound decisions**

The authority had developed an assessment process, independent of case line management. This ensured sufficient time and focus on the case to make sound decisions. Two social workers from a different team carried out the assessment as directed by the court. One took the lead role, with the other undertaking other tasks including direct work as appropriate. One of the assessing social workers could be from a specialist team such as adult mental health to facilitate a holistic view of the circumstances. Differences between assessors and key workers were carefully managed to ensure that a range of perspectives was brought to bear.

All Oldham childcare practitioners along with staff from partner agencies had received one-day training in the last two years as well as half-day 'refresher' training.

This assessment model was accepted by children's guardians, the judiciary and families as sufficiently independent, thus avoiding additional expense and delay arising from externally commissioned assessments. Positive feedback about impact was received from Cafcass; one guardian commented: 'This has worked well as the social worker who has provided evidence to the court is protected from criticism about bias. It has provided a "fresh pair of eyes" at a crucial time in the process and parents are less hostile towards a worker who has had no previous involvement, and therefore is potentially more cooperative.'

The authority was confident that delays for children whose cases were in proceedings had reduced and this had contributed to improved outcomes in permanency planning. The approach had also strengthened social workers' confidence and skills. The authority was in the process of planning a formal evaluation of the model and its outcomes.

107. While there was evidence of these different solutions using resources more efficiently and thus releasing valuable time for direct work with families, it was rare for their impact to have been formally evaluated.

### **Creating manageable caseloads**

108. All local authorities in the survey were striving to create manageable caseloads in the face of increasing demand and particular pressure points. Inspectors did not attempt to draw comparisons between authorities as to what constituted a manageable workload as this was dependent upon a number of factors such as the number of children in a family, the relative complexity of different family situations and social workers' individual levels of experience and efficiency.

109. Team managers had the key role in ensuring that caseloads were managed well and they skilfully applied judgement to this task. Their staff highly valued the thought and care invested. Where team managers managed caseloads most effectively they were likely to pay close attention to the transfer and allocation of work. In particular, team managers:

- considered the fit between the characteristics of the family and a particular worker's skill set
- took into account motivation, experience and aptitude in allocating work
- considered individual learning and development needs
- paid attention to the necessity for joint case allocation according to risk and complexity.

110. They were also skilled in managing the pressures arising from work already allocated. Particularly successful strategies were:

- proactive recognition of likely workload pressures and taking corrective action
- team managers' direct involvement with families during crisis or at particularly challenging times
- arranging for experienced staff to mentor those less experienced when undertaking complex work
- flexible use of case closure days or a small number of paid Saturday working days to enable completion of written work
- offering temporary relief from some responsibilities to enable staff to respond to crises.

111. Team managers achieved this in a context of permeable boundaries between teams and flexibility in managing the demands that led to high caseloads. Where staff caseloads were manageable, team managers also employed a number of strategies to ensure that work could be allocated across teams and geographical areas where necessary, and that vacancies could be shared or staff temporarily moved to cover peaks of demand. The careful attention to ensuring that social workers and service users were likely to be able to work well together could have a very significant impact on outcomes.

Serious concerns had been raised about the ability of a teenage mother to care for her unborn child. The young woman had not engaged with her previous worker who was an older woman of around the same age as her mother.

The team manager carefully decided that a young but skilled social worker might relate well to this parent. However, given her relative inexperience a more experienced worker was also allocated as mentor.

The social worker explained that she had thought about how to approach the parent and decided that she would be honest, down to earth and would avoid communicating in a way that might be interpreted as 'telling her what to do'. She felt that her age and approach would be helpful but was also clear about her authority and the risk of 'being lulled into a false sense of security'.

The mother explained that she was very wary of further involvement with social workers. She also stressed that her current worker's age was an advantage: 'I can talk to her because she's closer to my age.' She stated, 'we clicked'. However, she simultaneously recognised the boundaries to the relationship, describing the social worker as, 'open but professional' and 'really interested in what [her baby] is doing' as well as, 'keeping me on the straight and narrow'.

The impact of this skilled allocation and thoughtful work was that the mother was able to reflect on painful experiences from her early teenage life and to understand their role in what she called her 'mental health problems'. She explained that 'discussion changed my life'. She was also able to share information that she felt guilty about with a positive benefit: 'I felt really bad but I wasn't judged.'

The mother and baby were offered a shared foster care placement followed by supported housing. Agencies worked well together and the baby had thrived in the mother's care.

The child protection plan had recently ended and the mother was continuing to receive support. She commented, 'social workers were there for a bad reason, having them has helped me see how I could help other people'.

## Conclusion

The survey findings have underlined that the professional autonomy of front-line social workers was best facilitated when they experienced a high level of support and challenge. Local authorities that supported their front-line staff effectively developed strong and empowering organisational cultures within which expectations and accountabilities were clearly defined and understood. Social workers highly valued the opportunity to work in collaborative teams within which first line managers consistently offered sensitive professional supervision that critically analysed practice and helped social workers to manage the emotional impact of their work. Scrutiny and knowledgeable challenge from senior managers who took shared ownership and responsibility for managing risks and making complex decisions were also crucially important, provided that this occurred in the context of a 'no-blame' approach.

The provision of effective support to front-line staff was clearly linked to effective child protection planning that improved outcomes for children, young people and their families. Being well supported helped social workers to be clear about the purpose of their work and to feel confident, contained and safe. The characteristics of supportive organisational relationships were directly mirrored in work with parents. Front-line staff were better able to identify and manage risk and to purposefully engage parents to make positive changes. Almost all of the children and their parents were positive about the benefits of the child protection plans and could clearly describe how these had improved outcomes for children and young people.

This was expressed very eloquently by one child:

'I used to be really sad but didn't want to tell anybody; the social worker found a lady I could talk to and tell her all the stuff I didn't like to tell anyone else. I used to wish I was dead at night when I heard my Mum screaming but now I never hear anything and I never feel sad.'

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T Morrison, *Staff Supervision in Social Care*, Pavilion, 2005.



## **Annex A**

The questionnaire was sent to the survey local authorities in June 2011. Local authorities were asked to distribute the questionnaire to those staff who were involved in overseeing child protection plans. It was completed by 646 front-line staff in 13 of the 14 survey authorities. One local authority had recently completed its own survey. Not all respondents answered each question, so where percentages are given these relate to the proportion of staff responding to a particular question. The questionnaire findings were used to identify particular areas for in-depth exploration during survey visits.

### **The links between support for staff and outcomes for children and young people**

There was overwhelming consensus on the part of front-line staff completing the pre-survey questionnaire that the quality of support was vital in those cases where they had been able to improve outcomes. Only 4% of social workers and 2% of managers disagreed or strongly disagreed that it was vital. The large majority of social workers and managers thought that the quality of support they received enabled them to work more effectively.

### **Organisational culture**

The large majority of managers and social workers stated that senior managers were visible and accessible. Most managers and the large majority of social workers felt that expectations of staff were made clear by senior managers. Social workers were less likely than managers to state that their authority was open to new ideas that improved ways of working. Just over half of social workers and 77% of managers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. They were also less likely to think that they had sufficient opportunity to give their views about the direction and management of the service, as just under half agreed or strongly agreed with this statement compared with three quarters of managers.

### **Supervision**

The majority of respondents believed that senior managers gave supervision a high priority. Most social workers and managers stated that they received regular, protected time for supervision which was in accordance with their local policy and that their line manager helped them to improve outcomes for children and young people. Most social workers and the large majority of managers also stated that their manager helped them to make effective decisions in supervision. The large majority thought that supervision helped them with their professional development and to manage their workload, and that overall their immediate managers had a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. The questionnaire explored the extent to which supervision enabled staff to critically reflect on their work. The large majority of social workers and managers agreed or strongly agreed that it did enable them to do so. However, fewer, although still the majority of respondents, considered that supervision helped them to understand the emotional impact of the

work on them. Only a minority of social workers and managers stated that the quality of supervision was monitored regularly.

## **Recruitment and retention**

Most front-line staff responding to this survey were on a permanent contract. Thirty-nine per cent of social workers and 57% of managers had over three years experience. The majority of social workers and managers considered that there were sufficient numbers of qualified and experienced staff in their teams to meet needs.

## **Teamworking**

Most social workers and managers agreed or strongly agreed that their team colleagues provided effective personal and professional support for each other.

## **Learning and development**

A large majority of staff stated that their training needs were identified through formal appraisals of their work. Most had sufficient access to learning and development and considered that the training on offer was relevant to their roles in safeguarding children and young people, and kept them up-to-date with legislation and good practice. Learning and development also enabled the large majority to maintain their registration as qualified social workers. Most managers and slightly fewer social workers, although still a large majority, were able to take the training that was on offer. Local authorities faced challenges to ensure that learning was accredited and led to a qualification as 12% of social workers and 19% of managers disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were actively encouraged to undertake post-qualifying awards or management training. Despite this generally positive picture it is interesting that managers and social workers only very infrequently identified training as being one of three most important types of support in improving outcomes.

## **Multi-agency working**

The questionnaire responses identified that support from partner agencies was the second most frequently cited form of support by managers and the third most frequently cited by social workers in helping to improve outcomes for children. The large majority of social workers and most managers agreed that in making decisions about children there were appropriate levels of challenge among partner agencies.

## **Challenges in front-line practice**

Front-line staff were asked to identify the three most significant barriers to improving outcomes for children and young people. By far the most important barrier identified by both social workers and managers was a lack of resources. Social workers also identified a lack of time to work with families and high caseloads. Managers cited difficulties in multi-agency working and the combined demands of recording and paperwork. The majority of social workers also stated that they did not have sufficient time to work effectively with children and young people. Of the minority

who stated that they did have sufficient time, a manageable volume of work combined with receiving effective support from managers were given as the reasons for this. Fewer than half of the managers agreed that they had sufficient time to support the staff that they managed. When managers considered that they did have sufficient time they also attributed this to having a manageable workload and effective support from their managers. A minority of social workers considered that their local authority had an effective workload management system. The proportion of managers who thought that workload management systems were effective was higher as just over half agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

### **Equal opportunities**

Most staff considered that there was equality of opportunity in their workplace. They also thought that the support they received enabled them to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

## Questionnaire response from social workers (in percentages)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My workplace induction covered what I needed to know in relation to safeguarding of children and young people (282)	12	51	18	13	5	1
My induction prepared me for my specific job role (262)	12	44	21	18	5	0
<b>As a newly qualified social worker / manager or supervisor</b>						
My caseload has been carefully managed, in volume and complexity, sufficient to allow me to undertake my responsibilities in safeguarding of children and young people (225)	18	41	20	14	6	0
<b>The following questions are about the training you receive through your local authority. Please think about both in-house and external training when answering these questions</b>						
My training and development needs are identified through my formal appraisals (454)	21	52	12	9	4	2
I have sufficient access to learning and development to enable me to maintain my registration as a qualified social worker (446)	37	52	6	3	1	1
I am able to take up the training that is on offer (454)	26	50	12	8	2	1
<b>The training organised for me by my local authority</b>						
Is relevant to my role in safeguarding children and young people (461)	34	56	5	3	1	1
Keeps me up-to-date with legislation and good practice requirements in relation to safeguarding children and young people (455)	26	57	11	4	1	1
I am actively encouraged to achieve post- qualifying awards/MGMT qualifications (455)	26	39	20	8	4	2
I feel I have sufficient time to work effectively with the children and young people who are on my workload/I feel I have sufficient time to effectively support the staff that I manage (449)	3	18	22	38	19	1
<b>Workload</b>						
I feel that there are sufficient numbers of suitably qualified and experienced staff in the team to meet the needs of the children and young people on the team's workload (453)	14	39	13	25	9	0
There is an effective workload management system within the local authority (443)	5	33	29	22	8	2
<b>About the support I receive from my line manager</b>						
I receive regular, protected time for supervision and review of my work with my line manager (446)	28	53	10	8	1	0
The frequency of the supervision I receive is in accordance with the policy of the local authority (442)	27	50	10	7	1	5

**My line manager gives me appropriate support to safeguard children and young people by helping me to:**

Manage my workload (447)	19	52	18	9	1	0
Progress my continuing professional development (445)	22	55	15	7	1	1
Critically reflect on the quality of my work/critically reflect on the quality of my management and supervision activities (444)	17	49	20	12	2	0
Make effective decisions (446)	24	62	10	3	1	0
Understand the emotional impact of the work on myself (446)	18	39	23	14	5	1
Improve outcomes for children (444)	22	60	14	3	1	0

**My line manager**

My line manager acknowledges and praises good performance (449)	33	44	13	8	2	0
My line manager has a good understanding of my strengths and weaknesses (446)	26	51	14	6	2	2
Providing effective supervision is given a high priority by senior managers (447)	20	46	18	6	4	6
The quality of supervision I receive is monitored regularly (446)	12	32	26	10	4	16

**The support I receive from my organisation and partner agencies**

The local authority is open to new ideas that improve ways of working (444)	9	45	28	11	2	5
The local authority provides me with appropriate access to research findings and professional guidance (445)	13	54	20	11	1	1
Access to research findings and professional guidance has improved the quality and analysis of my assessments and care planning (443)	11	49	30	8	0	1
Senior managers ensure that staff are clear about their responsibilities and the expectations of them (444)	12	61	19	6	1	1
The local authority provides me with appropriate support to make difficult decisions when there are differences of professional opinion (441)	14	51	24	7	1	2
My team colleagues provide effective personal and professional support for each other. In making decisions about children, communication between agencies is open and honest (444)	40	49	8	2	0	0
In making decisions about children and young people there are appropriate levels of challenge among partner agencies (444)	13	63	17	5	1	1
I have sufficient opportunities to give my views about the direction and management of the service (442)	9	39	29	16	5	2
Senior managers are accessible and visible in the service (441)	23	45	18	9	5	0

**When answering the following questions, you may wish to consider gender, race and ethnicity, age, disability, faith and sexual orientation**

I feel that I have equal opportunities in my workplace (440)	26	56	12	4	2	0
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The support I receive from my organisation enables me to meet the needs of children and young people from all backgrounds (442)	18	55	19	6	2	1
The quality of support I receive enables me to work more effectively (430)	16	60	17	6	1	0
The quality of support I received was vital in cases where I have been able to improve outcomes for children and young people (423)	17	61	16	4	0	1

A total of 483 social workers responded to the questionnaire

The number of social workers answering each question is shown in parentheses

### Questionnaire response from social work managers (in percentages)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My workplace induction covered what I needed to know in relation to safeguarding of children and young people (61)	23	57	7	13	0	0
My induction prepared me for my specific job role (60)	18	50	13	13	5	0
<b>As a newly qualified social worker / manager or supervisor</b>						
My caseload has been carefully managed, in volume and complexity, sufficient to allow me to undertake my responsibilities in safeguarding of children and young people (63)	16	60	14	5	5	0
<b>The following questions are about the training you receive through your local authority. Please think about both in-house and external training when answering these questions</b>						
My training and development needs are identified through my formal appraisals (146)	21	51	13	11	3	0
I have sufficient access to learning and development to enable me to maintain my registration as a qualified social worker (143)	45	49	5	1	0	0
I am able to take up the training that is on offer (148)	27	57	7	7	1	0
<b>The training organised for me by my local authority</b>						
Is relevant to my role in safeguarding children and young people (147)	27	65	7	1	1	0
Helps me to understand and meet the individual needs of those I manage (144)	19	66	12	3	1	0
Keeps me up-to-date with legislation and good practice requirements in relation to safeguarding children and young people (148)	17	70	8	3	1	0
I am actively encouraged to achieve post-qualifying awards/MGMT qualifications (147)	14	40	27	16	3	0

I feel I have sufficient time to work effectively with the children and young people who are on my workload/I feel I have sufficient time to effectively support the staff that I manage (146)	8	38	24	25	4	1
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**Workload**

I feel that there are sufficient numbers of suitably qualified and experienced staff in the team to meet the needs of the children and young people on the team's workload (148)	14	45	11	27	3	0
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There is an effective workload management system within the local authority (143)	6	45	22	23	4	0
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**About the support I receive from my line manager**

I receive regular, protected time for supervision and review of my work with my line manager (145)	28	53	8	9	1	0
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The frequency of the supervision I receive is in accordance with the policy of the local authority (142)	30	52	7	9	1	1
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**My line manager gives me appropriate support to safeguard children and young people by helping me to:**

Manage my workload (144)	17	52	20	8	3	0
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Progress my continuing professional development (144)	15	53	20	10	2	0
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Critically reflect on the quality of my work/critically reflect on the quality of my management and supervision activities (145)	19	47	26	6	2	1
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Make effective decisions (143)	24	55	16	2	2	0
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Understand the emotional impact of the work on myself (147)	15	43	26	10	6	0
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Improve outcomes for children (144)	24	63	11	1	1	0
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**My line manager**

My line manager acknowledges and praises good performance (148)	28	45	17	6	4	0
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My line manager has a good understanding of my strengths and weaknesses (145)	24	49	19	3	3	1
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Providing effective supervision is given a high priority by senior managers (148)	24	50	18	5	2	1
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The quality of supervision I receive is monitored regularly (145)	11	30	32	17	3	8
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**The support I receive from my organisation and partner agencies**

The local authority is open to new ideas that improve ways of working (148)	18	59	18	3	0	1
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The local authority provides me with appropriate access to research findings and professional guidance (147)	22	57	16	4	1	0
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Access to research findings and professional guidance has improved the quality and analysis of my assessments and care planning (147)	17	59	21	3	0	0
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Senior managers ensure that staff are clear about their responsibilities and the expectations of them (147)	18	68	7	6	0	0
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The local authority provides me with appropriate support to make difficult decisions when there are differences of professional opinion (148)	17	64	14	5	1	0
My team colleagues provide effective personal and professional support for each other. In making decisions about children, communication between agencies is open and honest (146)	33	58	9	0	0	0
In making decisions about children and young people there are appropriate levels of challenge among partner agencies (148)	16	65	16	3	0	0
I have sufficient opportunities to give my views about the direction and management of the service (147)	21	54	18	6	1	0
Senior managers are accessible and visible in the service (147)	32	41	16	7	3	0
<b>When answering the following questions, you may wish to consider gender, race and ethnicity, age, disability, faith and sexual orientation</b>						
I feel that I have equal opportunities in my workplace (147)	24	61	7	7	0	0
The support I receive from my organisation enables me to meet the needs of children and young people from all backgrounds (146)	17	65	13	4	1	0
The quality of support I receive enables me to work more effectively (141)	14	60	24	2	0	0
The quality of support I received was vital in cases where I have been able to improve outcomes for children and young people (138)	16	62	20	2	0	0

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A total of 163 social work managers responded to the questionnaire

The number of social work managers answering each question is shown in parentheses



## **Annex B: List of local authorities visited**

Bracknell Forest  
Bristol City Council  
Buckinghamshire County Council  
City of York  
Halton Borough Council  
Hartlepool Borough Council  
London Borough of Lewisham  
Lincolnshire County Council  
London Borough of Barnet  
London Borough of Wandsworth  
Metropolitan Borough of Oldham  
North Tyneside Council  
Plymouth City Council  
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea