

Safeguarding children



Key messages

The lead member for children's services (LMCS) has a statutory role in ensuring the council fulfils its duty for safeguarding children; in partnership with education, childcare and health services, the police and communities.

The council becomes the corporate parent for children removed from their families into care, and must exercise scrutiny and challenge to ensure the best possible outcomes for them.

You should ensure you are briefed on national guidance, inspection frameworks and your role in inspections of children's services.

Make sure you ask questions, visit council services and those of partner agencies, listen to staff, children, young people, families and carers.

You should request regular briefings on performance monitoring, quality assurance audits, workforce issues such as caseloads, supervision arrangements, sickness and vacancies.

Maintain your role as participant observer at the Local Children Safeguarding Board (LSCB), and meet regularly with the independent chair of the LSCB and your head of safeguarding to ensure you are fully briefed and are able to challenge decision making.

What you need to know

Safeguarding children is a key area for all councils. Although the LMCS and DCS hold the accountability, this is on behalf of the whole council and partner agencies, so everyone must play their part.

Following a referral about a child or family, the local authority will gather information from a range of sources. This will help social workers to determine whether further action is necessary to safeguard the child, or whether their needs can be met without a formal social care intervention.

Many local areas have developed a Multi-Agency Service Hub (MASH), or similar multi-agency information sharing processes. A MASH colocates a whole range of agencies, including police, children's social care, education, probation and health staff, to share information and spot emerging problems early, potentially saving lives. The MASH approach was first introduced by Devon County Council and has since been adopted across much of the UK.

Where it is decided that a child requires additional support from children's social care services (including for those children with a disability), the local authority social worker will lead a multi-agency assessment of their needs under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. A multi-agency child in need plan may then be developed, setting out which agencies will provide which services to the child and family.

If the social worker suspects that the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, the local authority will hold a multi-agency strategy discussion to decide whether to initiate enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989. These enquiries may result in a child protection conference and a child protection plan being put in place.

If positive change cannot be achieved within a realistic timescale, following regular reviews of the child protection plan, the council may instigate legal proceedings to remove children from their birth family and take them into local authority care.

Where there is a risk to the life of the child or likelihood of serious immediate harm, then a local authority can apply for an Emergency Protection Order to place them under the protection of the local authority.

The police and the NSPCC also have statutory child protection powers to act immediately to secure the safety of a child.

Revised national guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' came into effect in April 2013. The guidance sets out the statutory role of local authorities and their partners.

The guidance reminds professionals that safeguarding systems should ensure the child's needs are paramount and should always be put first.

It is important for a new LMCS to understand the legal framework and expectations for safeguarding and corporate parenting, so ensure you have a full briefing on taking up your role and consider establishing a mentoring relationship with an experienced lead member (or offering this if you are already experienced).

You should work with your DCS and officers to understand local needs and context, policy and practice, and to establish a shared vision of what the council wants to achieve for children, young people, families and carers.

Safeguarding is a high profile area that is subject to national scrutiny and concern, often prompted by high profile cases. Make sure you keep abreast of developments by reading the LGA Children and Young People's Board bulletins and through updates from your DCS and officers, as well as the regional networks of lead members.

Performance information

Agree a cycle of activity and briefings with your DCS and senior team, for performance reports, case audits, independent reviewing officer reports (an annual requirement), workforce information, complaints, and information on children in care, foster carers and adoptions.

Ensure you receive regular updates on the social care workforce: vacancies, sickness, caseloads, expert practitioners, training and support. Professional registration for social workers is through the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

With the DCS and the senior team, make sure you are aware of demand pressures including numbers of social work referrals, children in need (including those with a disability), numbers of child protection plans and numbers of looked after children.

There are a number of ways to monitor positive outcomes for children receiving services from social care, as well as overall protection from harm.

For example, developmental indicators for early years, school readiness, school attendance, educational attainment, health and dental screening, post-16 participation in education, training or employment, housing and successful transition to independent living for young people.

Receiving regular updates of performance information and indicators will give you an overview of how your safeguarding services are performing and whether there are any areas of concern or issues that you may want to challenge.

Consider sharing briefings on performance and demand for services with opposition leads as a mutual area of priority, and connect with other councillors on fostering and adoption panels.

Councils also have Corporate Parenting Boards to monitor outcomes for children in care, and young people leaving care. See also the Must Know on early help, corporate parenting and adoption.

Safeguarding in action

Keep in touch with front line services to understand their pressures and needs; you can do this by visiting social work teams. Sit in on child protection conferences and case audits to build a comprehensive picture of information, through observation, data and listening to staff and service users.

It is important to meet with a variety of children and families, children in care, foster carers and adoptive parents. Most local authorities have Children in Care Councils, and Foster Carers Associations.

As well as being a high profile, high risk area, social care is also a high cost area. Ensure strong commissioning arrangements are in place to ensure quality of provision, and to keep placement costs in budget.

Understanding the reasons for neglect, abuse and family breakdown will encourage links across the council and other agencies, and will also help to commission effective early help services.

Local Safeguarding Children Board

Each upper tier council will have an independently chaired Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), to champion safeguarding for children and hold the council and all relevant agencies to account. The LMCS has the right to attend as a participant observer. It is important for the LMCS and DCS to have a regular relationship with the independent chair.

The chair of the LSCB is appointed and can also be removed by the chief executive of the council, in conjunction with a panel including partners and lay members. The chief executive, alongside key partners, and the LMCS will hold the chair to account for the effective running of the LSCB.

The LSCB will receive performance information from all agencies, outcomes of multi-agency audits and consider the learning from any serious case reviews.

Serious case reviews

Serious case reviews (SCRs) are undertaken by LSCBs for every case where abuse or neglect is known or suspected, and either:

- a child dies
- a child is seriously harmed and there are concerns about how organisations or professionals worked together to protect the child.

Where a case meets the threshold, the LSCB should aim to complete the SCR within six months and publish the findings to improve practice. A national panel of independent experts on serious case reviews was established in 2013, to provide advice to LSCBs on initiating SCRs and in cases where the LSCB decides not to publish the SCR.

LSCBs are also encouraged to consider undertaking reviews of cases that may not meet the formal SCR threshold, and of instances of good practice, with the intention of establishing a culture of ongoing learning and improvement.

Child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a horrendous crime, which can take place in any community and in any area of the country. High profile cases and the Deputy Children's Commissioner's two year inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups has led to a national focus on missing children and child sexual exploitation, and each area is expected to raise awareness and ensure multi-agency planning to respond to local issues.

CSE is a complex crime and the media focus on particular cases can help to perpetuate some of the stereotypes that exist. The danger of a narrow focus on one particular form of CSE is that attention can be diverted from crimes which do not appear to match that model, with the risk of victims not receiving the help they need.

Local government plays a crucial, statutory role in safeguarding children, including tackling child sexual exploitation. However, councils cannot do this alone, and rely on the cooperation of the wider community. Councils can use their links with police, schools, health professionals, and community and faith groups to highlight the signs and ensure people know where to turn if they have concerns.

The Independent Inquiry into CSE in Rotherham has highlighted the importance of the role of the LMCS, and all elected members of the council, as well as officers. It is important that you are aware of local strategies to raise awareness of and tackle CSE, as well as how local services identify and support victims.

The Ofsted Single Inspection Framework and Integrated Inspections

From November 2013 Ofsted began implementing the first round of inspections under the new single inspection framework (SIF).

Key reporting areas include Children in Need of Help and Protection; Children Looked After and Achieving Permanence – Adoption Performance and Experiences and Progress of Care Leavers; Leadership, Management and Governance and the Effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. There will be a judgement in each of the six areas. The first five areas combine to give an overall judgement.

However, Ofsted expects, as a minimum that services for children in need of help and protection should be 'good' as the standard. This means that if the first area of inspection 'requires improvement', whilst all other areas are 'good', the overall judgement will be 'requires improvement.'

Ofsted and their partner agencies, the Care Quality Commission, HMI Prisons, HMI Probation and HMI Constabulary have proposed to undertake an integrated inspection of services for children in need of help and protection and children looked after from April 2015.

Inspection of services to protect children in need of protection will take place during one four week timeframe. Each agency will receive a separate judgement, but the report will be combined.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board will receive a joint judgement. It is proposed that between 20 and 25 local areas will be inspected in this way between April 2015 and November 2016.

Ofsted will continue to carry out the Single Inspection Framework of children's services until November 2016. Where an integrated inspection takes place, it is proposed that the SIF comprises the council element, with findings published as part of the integrated inspection report.

Ensure you are prepared for your role as lead member in inspections. You will be expected to be familiar with the service, including outcomes and performance information; to be providing strategic leadership, support and challenge; and ensuring sufficient budget allocation while monitoring value for money.

Also take time to understand the judgement criteria, and what the outcome will mean for your council. If children's services are judged to be inadequate, Ofsted will monitor improvement plans and processes regularly, and the Department for Education (DfE) may take intervention measures if improvement is deemed to be too slow, or children's safety is deemed to be at risk under the existing arrangements.

There is plenty of pre-inspection support available through LGA leadership training, regional seminars, and peer reviews. There is also a flexible and responsive offer of bespoke diagnostic or peer review tools either to individual authorities or as part of a regional offer or they may be commissioned by the DfE for authorities in intervention measures.

Questions to consider

Have you set up regular meetings with the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, to keep up to date with the work of the Board and to challenge local strategies and plans?

Has your LSCB published recent Serious Case Reviews? Has learning and good practice been put in place or developed as a result of the SCR?

Do you know and understand your responsibilities as part of the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework process? Ensure you keep up to date with developments regarding the proposed integrated inspection process that will begin in some areas from April 2015.

Will you be updated regularly on performance information related to the social care workforce?

Other key information to request includes the number of child protection plans in place, social care referrals and children in need plans.

Does your LSCB have a CSE strategy in place? Has there been any mapping of CSE in your council area? What services are available locally to prevent CSE, as well as support victims of CSE? How well are local partners working together to raise awareness, identify and tackle CSE?

Useful resources

Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance
www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/statutory/g00213160/working-together-to-safeguard-children

Framework and evaluation schedule for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers (single inspection framework) and reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-and-evaluation-schedule-for-inspection-of-services-for-children-need-of-help-and-protectio

Safeguarding children peer review
www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/peer-challenges/-/journal_content/56/10180/3511045/ARTICLE

“If only someone had listened” Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups Final Report November 2013
www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/info/csegg1

LGA CSE Awareness Raising Resource for Councillors
www.local.gov.uk/children-and-young-people/-/journal_content/56/10180/3790391/ARTICLE

Crown Prosecution Service Information Sharing Protocol and Best Practice Guidance
www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/third_party_protocol_2013.pdf

First Annual Report of Serious Case Reviews
www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-case-review-panel-first-annual-report

DfE research report: Barriers to learning from Serious Case Reviews
www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-to-learning-serious-case-reviews

Multi-Agency Information Sharing: Home Office review of multi-agency information sharing models currently in use across the country, with a particular focus on Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/338875/MASH.pdf

There is training and support from LGA Leadership Essentials, peer reviews and the regional networks for Lead Members and DCSs
www.local.gov.uk/cyp-improvement-and-support



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
Email info@local.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk

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