

Must know: The role of a council leader in improving outcomes for children

Is your council in a strong position to continue to improve outcomes for children and young people and their families? This guide, specifically developed for the council leader, has been shaped by current and former leaders, lead members and chief executives with experience of children's services improvement.

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Summary

This guide, specifically developed for the council leader, has been shaped by current and former leaders, lead members and chief executives with experience of children's services improvement.

It will explore your role, working with your lead member for children's services (LMCS), chief executive (CE) and director of children's services (DCS), in leading one of the most sensitive, expensive and high-risk areas of local government.



Keeping children safe is one of the most important duties a council has. If things go wrong, the consequences can be catastrophic for young people, and have significant financial and reputational costs. But driving improvement should never be restricted to crisis responses. We need to make sure our children are receiving the best possible level of support that we can offer at all times.”

Councillor Louise Gittins, Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board Chair and Leader Cheshire West and Chester Council

Introduction

Ensuring local areas and services meet the needs of children and families is arguably one of the most important functions of local government.

When things are working well, it can be an area that doesn't draw the political or corporate attention of council leadership, but if there are issues these can escalate and unravel quickly - potentially leading to an Ofsted failure or, worse still, an avoidable tragedy. As leader you will be managing competing priorities and demands for resources but identifying and addressing issues in children's services early is key. The financial and reputational implications of a failure in children's services would likely be council-wide and significant.

In the discharge of their statutory responsibilities, top tier and unitary councils are focused on keeping children safe and stepping in to offer support or look after them when they can't be cared for safely at home. They also have statutory duties to support educational excellence for all children and young people in their area, an important part of which is support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and preparing these young people for adulthood, which can be a significant financial pressure for many areas.

As leader you should therefore have an understanding of the conditions for children's services success and improvement, and your role in enabling them. This will mean advocating for effective place-based prioritisation of children's needs through partnership structures, and ensuring that the health and wellbeing needs of children and young people, including those with SEND, are central to local planning through the Integrated Care System structures. Together with your CE you should maintain line of sight to services for children and families and be mindful that problems can be an early indicator of wider corporate and leadership issues within the organisation.

This guide is intended as a summary for council leaders to support you in navigating your role to ensure that children and young people in your area are safe, heard and have their needs met.

Statutory appointments

All upper tier and unitary authorities with responsibility for education and children's social care must appoint a DCS with professional responsibility for children's services and designate a lead member with political responsibility for children's services (LMCS) as set out in the Children Act 2004. They hold direct local accountability for the effectiveness, availability and value for money of the local authority children's services, particularly education and children's social care, with the DCS holding professional responsibility and the LMCS holding political responsibility. The LMCS is the only role for elected members that's defined in legislation and requires careful working with partners and across the council. It is therefore a key appointment for your Cabinet.

Strategic quartet

Together with the DCS, the LMCS, and the CE, the leader has a key leadership role across the council and through working with other local agencies to improve outcomes for children and young people. This strategic 'quartet' of political and officer leadership is fundamental to effectiveness and sustained improvement, and to work well it is essential that it has a shared vision, common value base and agreed set of objectives. The quartet must establish a system of delegated responsibility and performance reporting in order to fulfil their, and the council's obligations. This should recognise the role that the CE and Leader have in providing oversight, whilst not intervening in the day-to-day management of children's services.

It is worth noting that amongst a network of formal meetings and boards, the quartet can be a forum for a different type of discussion that can help to ensure that political and corporate leadership around children's services, including education and SEND, is strong and united.

“ Your 'strategic quartet' around children's services needs to be in the same place to drive change. The magic happens when there are honest (and sometimes challenging!) conversations about the state of play and the things you want to change. If you have an Improvement Board ideally the whole quartet should attend to ensure that the right messages are getting to the corporate core of the organisation.”

Councillor Abi Brown, Chair, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board and former Leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council 2019-2023

Appointing and supporting a lead member for children's services (LMCS)

When appointing a LMCS, the council is delegating political responsibility for the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of all children's services – social care, education, SEND and youth offending services. The LMCS is also democratically accountable to communities and has a key role in defining the local vision and setting political priorities for children's services within the broader political context of the council. It is a demanding role requiring someone with the time, energy and determination to be a committed champion for children, and the ability to quickly develop the knowledge and insight needed to drive improvement. You may want to consider making the appointment with a view to the same person staying in the position for a full term of office. You should also be mindful of any potential or perceived conflict of interest.



“The role of the LMCS is vital in leading and improving children's services in a local authority. It is vital that the Leader appoints someone who has the time, determination and dedication to give the role the focus it needs.”

Councillor Laura Mayes, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education, and Skills, Wiltshire Council

In larger councils, the leader might consider a deputy for the LMCS to share the workload and provide valuable additional capacity - as well as supporting succession planning to ensure that any future transition or changes in political leadership is as smooth as it can be. **However, it's important to remember that even if you create another portfolio holder for specific areas of children's services like Education and SEND, overall statutory responsibility for these services remains with the LMCS. There can only be one statutory role.**

Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the DCS and LMCS (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271429/directors_of_child_services_-_stat_guidance.pdf) was published alongside the Children Act 2004. The legislation and guidance represent an unusual level of prescription for local government roles and structures. Last reviewed in 2013 it remains valid and relevant, acting as a national statutory 'job description' unique to these roles. It is essential reading for a leader when they appoint a LMCS and in the continued challenge and support they provide to help them to be effective in their role.

In particular, the guidance states:

“ The DCS and LMCS roles provide a clear and unambiguous line of political and professional accountability for children’s wellbeing. The DCS and the LMCS should report to the chief executive and to the council leader or mayor respectively as the post holders with ultimate responsibility for the political and corporate leadership of the council and accountability for ensuring that the effectiveness of steps taken and capacity to improve outcomes for all children and young people is reflected across the full range of the council’s business.’

The guidance also explains the duties of the council through these roles for leadership of local partners in delivering improved outcomes for children. It makes repeated references to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to which the UK is a signatory. You may wish to explore how councillors, particularly those that are part of Cabinet, Corporate Parenting Board or Scrutiny committees, understand the core principles of UNCRC.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has a wide range of support available to both new and existing LMCS which you should encourage them to access, and they can contact their **LGA regional Children’s Improvement Adviser** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/childrens-services/lga-principal-advisers-and-childrens-improvement-advisers-region>) to find out more. This includes workshops and training such as ‘**Leadership Essentials**’ and ‘**Leadership Enhanced**’ (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/leadership-essentials>) which are both 2-day training courses focused on leadership of children’s services for new and more experienced political leaders respectively. They can also access opportunities for mentoring, documents providing tips

and advice on their first weeks and months in role, and e-learning that can be accessed on the **LGA's e-learning platform (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/leadership-workforce-and-communications/councillor-development/councillor-e-learning>)**. This support is also open to Chairs of Children's Scrutiny Committees, and you as leader. You should also encourage your LMCS to make contact with their Regional Lead Member Network for peer networking and support.

"The statutory Lead Member for children's services can feel like a lonely role and as leader you can and should help through constructive challenge, advice and support. In Cheshire West, portfolio holders link really closely together across children's services, mental health, poverty and other areas affecting our young people, to make sure that the decisions we make are as holistic as possible."

Councillor Louise Gittins, Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board and Leader Cheshire West and Chester Council

Key questions for leaders:

- How do you ensure that the LMCS has the capacity to fulfil the demands of the role?
- Are you creating a culture of support for your LMCS to enable them to perform their statutory role?
- Do members have an appropriate level of understanding and involvement in children's services?
- How are you as leader ensuring an appropriate line of sight to children's experiences and outcomes?
- Are you assured that your LMCS have a line of sight to the local Safeguarding Children Partnership?

Recruitment of and support for DCS

Over time the effectiveness of any council children's service will probably turn on the effectiveness of the DCS. Most post holders would agree the job is as rewarding as it is challenging, but it remains one of the hardest chief officer roles to fill and retain. Annual turnover nationally is around 30 per cent. While we know it is likely to take over three years to sustainably improve children's services, the average length of tenure is less than that. In some places considerably so.

Leaders should have a key role, together with the CE, in appointing the DCS and for leading the political and organisational culture that will support them to perform their role effectively. It should go without saying that any DCS appointment decision should be taken with great care, utilising good professional, possibly external, advice and with a full and verifiable assessment of the candidate's background. That should include an awareness of the candidate's track record in Ofsted inspection. The same considerations and due diligence should be applied to interim appointments.

It is permissible for councils to incorporate the DCS role with other duties if this does not weaken or dilute the focus on outcomes for children and young people. In the past this was mostly seen when the statutory DCS and Director of Adults services role was performed by one person as a 'twin-hatter'. However, increasing demands of these roles, including through inspections of both services, has made this a rarer occurrence. It is a statutory requirement that a **'test of assurance'** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/childrens-services/test-assurance-offer-review-senior-management-structures#:~:text=The%20LGA%20offer%20is%20an,in%20the%20form%20of%20recommendations.>) is undertaken if a DCS is given any additional roles and responsibilities.

Inspections of children's services and SEND and alternative provision (AP)

The **Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS)** inspection framework looks at leadership of children's services including how well leaders are grasping issues and building capacity for improvement where there are signs of deterioration in services. Ofsted condense their analysis into three questions – which are useful for you to have in mind as part of your role in the 'strategic quartet'.

- What do you know about the quality and impact of social work practice with children and families in your authority?
- How do you know it?
- What are your plans to maintain or improve practice?

These questions are part of an annual conversation discussion between the council and Ofsted with forms part of the ILACS framework, together with the council's annual self-evaluation.

Leaders should also be aware that Ofsted do from time to time undertake a focused visit of a council which is part of the ILACS framework. **Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAs)** which also cover partners and involve multiple inspectorates, are also part of the inspection landscape for children's services. Youth Justice Services are inspected by HMI Probation and look at the arrangements for organisational delivery of the service, the quality of work done with children sentenced by the courts, and the quality of out-of-court work.

SEND and AP is subject to a separate Ofsted/CQC inspection with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) under the **SEND Area Inspection Framework** which focuses on how effective the SEND and AP area partnership is in delivering outcomes for children and their families. Ofsted and CQC also undertake thematic visits to a small number of areas

each year to investigate a particular aspect of the SEND system in depth.

Leaders should have an understanding of SEND and AP as covered by the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice. This requires the views of children, and their families are taken into account, keeping under review their education and care provision, as well as preparing for adulthood and publishing a local offer. You should also be aware of the strength and quality of your partnership with your ICB and their effectiveness as a joint statutory partner around children's services, SEND, children's health and wellbeing, and joint commissioner of services.

In March 2023 the government published the SEND and AP Improvement Plan. There will be new national requirements around reporting data and the establishment of a dashboard so data around local area performance can be published and compared.

Consequences of an 'inadequate' Ofsted judgement

The judgement of Ofsted on a council's children's services has the capacity to have the most profound impact on children's services and the wider council and partnership. Councils with an 'inadequate' Ofsted judgement need to redirect a huge amount of resource and focus to deliver improvement at pace, all under a media and government spotlight.

Analysis has shown a correlation between local authorities that have an 'inadequate' Ofsted judgement and those with high proportions of agency staff and vacancy rates. There are differing views on the cause of the correlation – do councils that do not create the conditions for good social work practice experience higher workforce instability contributing to poor Ofsted outcomes, or do the Ofsted outcomes in part contribute to the workforce instability? It is likely to be a combination, with Ofsted ratings exacerbating existing issues, but low turnover of staff will support social workers to build relationships with children and families. You should ensure that your LMCS has opportunities to

update you on agency rates, vacancy rates, and sickness amongst your children's services workforce, as these can be signatures of risk. Your LMCS should understand the profile and narrative for children's services caseloads and be alert to changes that could reflect systemic issues.

Local authorities have also found that an Inadequate Ofsted judgement (or a judgement of 'systemic failings' for the Area SEND inspection) has affected their ability to recruit and retain experienced staff. This in turn can increase agency staffing spend, just at a time that stability in the workforce and investment in services is most critical to support rapid improvement.

Key questions for leaders:

- Is there a local narrative which helps members better understand how and why children's services is the way it is. For example rationale for the numbers and proportions of children in care? This can vary substantially within and between authorities, represent the most significant cost pressure and tell you a lot about how services are organised and delivered.
- Is there volatility and variations in key data indicators? For example child protection activity which may signal a deterioration of management grip on the service.
- How strong is your local area partnership around SEND and AP – is there clarity on what is working well and not working well, and the priorities for improvement? Would local parents and carers recognise these priorities?

In conversation with Councillor Abi Brown

In conversation with Councillor Abi Brown, Chair, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board, former Leader of Stoke-On-Trent City Council 2019 to 2023

When Councillor Abi Brown became leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council in May 2019, the council had recently received an Ofsted Inadequate judgement for children's services and was under Department for Education intervention.

In October 2022 Ofsted reported ***'Services for vulnerable children and families in Stoke-on-Trent have improved substantially since the last inspection in February 2019. The improvement work is supported politically, with investment in children's services seen as part of a wider council development programme.'***

How did you view children's services as a leader?

I came to the role of leader knowing that children's services would be the number one challenge. The journey through intervention was tough and long and had a big impact on me as a leader and gave me a fresh perspective on the services we deliver. Improvement required a change of culture across the whole authority and recognition of the role of the wider council in improving outcomes for children and young people.

How can leaders make a difference to children's services?

The leader can be pivotal in securing wide political engagement for children's services improvement and can use their unique sphere of influence to ensure that children's services are widely valued and understood across the council and partnerships. When the organisation is making difficult funding decisions, children's outcomes need to be central to the wider priorities of the organisation.

I looked for ways to directly add value to services as essentially a lay person. One way I did this was to put my efforts into supporting fostering. I used my role and relationships to get help from other parts of the organisation and to engage partners including the business community, schools, universities, police and fire services. Fostering became something that was talked about regularly and widely within the council and with partners, and many organisations adopted foster friendly practices leading to Stoke-on-Trent becoming the UK's first Fostering Friendly City, and the city council being awarded the Fostering Network's Employer of the Year in 2022. Fostering Friendly is a scheme created by The Fostering Network, which supports employers to implement a policy which promotes fostering and supports their foster carer employees.

What advice would you give to Leaders experiencing challenges with children's services?

Spend some time talking to leaders in other authorities and getting advice.

Think carefully about who 'fronts' the improvement journey – it should be someone with influence and credibility who can create a shared vision of the future to bring everyone along. It may be that your CE or DCS is in the best position to do this (depending on their history with children's services and the politics of your organisation).

Be clear on your role and the role of your lead member and don't underestimate how influential you can be. Whilst your lead member will be working very closely with children's services, you can make sure that work is supported and reinforced by the wider Cabinet and partners.



Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances (RIAs)

By staying in touch with your neighbours and the wider region, your council will be able to share concerns, access support and develop regional programmes to support children's services improvement.

The Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances (RIIA) lead various strands of children's services sector-led improvement activity and data benchmarking at a regional level. They bring together DCSs, CEs, LMCSs and other senior leaders in both local authorities and trusts to challenge and support one another to improve outcomes for children and young people.

RIAs support the development of relationships across council borders, contribute to the regional 'voice' on children's services issues, and provide access to improvement support. Find out who Chairs the RIIA in your region and satisfy yourself that the key people in your authority are engaged. You may find it useful to use the regional data sets held by the RIIA to contextualise your children's services data.



Leaders can also open the door to further collaboration with peers across local authority borders. This might include reciprocal arrangements for out of borough placements, or a range of other challenges shared by Councils up and down the country, but ultimately, it's about political leaders working together to help officers provide the best possible service they can for children and families.”

Councillor Louise Gittins, Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board and Leader Cheshire West and Chester

Political leadership for children's services: enabling a whole council approach to children's

services

“ Leaders have a crucial role to play in ensuring that all elected members support children and young people and understand and fulfil their role as corporate parents. You should ensure that your LMCS is supported in their statutory role, your Cabinet understands children’s services, and that consideration is given to the impact on children when decision making and budget setting in other policy areas.”

Councillor Gillian Ford, Deputy Leader, London Borough of Havering

Children’s services, including children’s social care, SEND and AP and youth justice services can only thrive when supported by the whole council and partners. As leader, you can provide child-centred political leadership that cuts across portfolios, and organisations. In practice this could include:

- having a shared ambition for children and young people across party lines
- creating a culture that values children and prioritises their needs at a strategic level
- using language that cares and supports a culture of putting children first for example, talking about the children of **our** communities and outcomes for **all** children rather than the more narrowly perceived ‘children’s services’

- fostering collective responsibility and commitment across the whole council for children and young people, and building consensus around what is needed to enable improvement.

“ The council leader should have a sense of entitlement for children and make sure that the whole council is child-centred and contributing to improving outcomes for children. If you get children’s services wrong, it is heart-wrenching, and you are failing vulnerable children in your community.

Failure is also expensive and this could hinder your efforts to help the rest of the council to see children’s services as an exciting opportunity to make a difference.”

Councillor Steve Darling, Leader, Liberal Democrat Group and former Leader of Torbay Council 2019-2023

- Modelling and championing active corporate parenting, setting the tone for political colleagues and ensuring children in care and care leavers are prioritised, championed and cared for by all councillors as corporate parents. Make sure children in your care and care leavers are part of all policy and strategic planning considerations and link corporate parenting responsibilities to everything you do. Ask relentlessly and at every opportunity, ‘would this be good enough for my child?’
- Ensuring that the complex network of local area partnerships, including crime and disorder and health partnerships are giving weight to and prioritising the needs of children - particularly those cared for by the council

and children with SEND.

- Ensure that the needs of children with additional needs are championed by Cabinet and key partners.



It's important for me as Leader to help the agencies we work with understand the level of responsibility that comes with being a corporate parent. Corporate parenting is on the agenda at our Health and Wellbeing Board so a wider range of partners are engaged in considering how they make a positive difference to the lives of our children in care and care leavers. We've also asked our Health and Wellbeing Board members and key partners across the sub-region more widely to be signatories to a Care Leaver Covenant to commit to do everything that can to provide additional support and opportunities to children in care and care leavers through the course of their work."

Councillor Louise Gittins, Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board and Leader Cheshire West and Chester

- Being aware of how your role in the strategic quartet may need to change from time to time depending on the wider context including when there is a new DCS, CE or LMCS, or to drive rapid improvement in response to identified issues or an Ofsted judgement.

- Making investments in children's services to support progress and improvement.
- Support your LMCS by:
 - ensuring that their statutory role is understood by and supported by Cabinet and full council
 - understanding the conditions for success in children's services and helping your LMCS to understand them
 - supporting them in making sure that children's needs and voices are integrated into strategic discussions and decision making across the council and partnerships.

“ You are in a position to bring together the whole orchestra of the local community to play their part for children. Make children's services part of the conversations you have within the council and use your community links to draw in local businesses and the third sector. Torbay has worked with many local organisations to offer foster carers and their cared for children free visits including the local football club, the zoo and the theatre.”

Councillor Steve Darling, Leader, Liberal Democrat Group and Former Leader of Torbay Council 2019-2023

Governance

The system of political assurance and accountability around children's services should support children's services improvement, providing robust challenge, oversight, scrutiny and support.

Ofsted state that leaders, including elected members, should have a comprehensive and current knowledge of what is happening at the 'front line' and how well children and young people are helped, cared for and protected. This can be supported through the engagement of members in robust Scrutiny and Corporate Parenting panel arrangements, and through achievements, progress and views of children in care and care leavers being shared at full council meetings.

The Ofsted/CQC Area SEND Inspection will judge the effectiveness of the local area partnership's SEND arrangements and will evaluate how the local area partners work together to plan, evaluate and develop the SEND system. You should seek assurance from your LMCS that the governance arrangements for SEND are clear, including links through to the Health and Wellbeing Board, ICB other partnership boards and scrutiny. You may want to consider having a Strategic Local Area SEND and AP partnership that owns and drives this work.



“The Executive should encourage members to use the scrutiny process to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people and the Chair of Scrutiny should be encouraged to invite the LMCS to attend the Scrutiny committee meetings to answer questions and provide reassurance.”

Councillor Gillian Ford, Deputy Leader, London Borough of Havering

Key questions for leaders:

- Is there a healthy system of political scrutiny and accountability through your governance structures, for example, Scrutiny Committee, Corporate Parenting Board, Improvement Board, and local Safeguarding Partnership?
- Are children's issues considered and prioritised by the complex network of local partnerships such as crime and disorder, ICP, SEND and AP Board?
- Are the governance arrangements for the local area SEND partnership clear including how it links with the Health and Wellbeing Board, Integrated Care Board and Scrutiny.
- Are councillors accessing sufficient training and development on safeguarding and corporate parenting, both as newly elected councillors and to develop them as members of scrutiny and corporate parenting governance structures?

“ Talk to young people; work closely with schools, attend professional meetings; be curious - even if your Council is considered Good or Outstanding. I retain a constant line of sight into children's services, even though our children's services have a great reputation.”

Councillor Louise Gittins, Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board and Leader Cheshire West and Chester

Corporate parenting

When children come into the care of the local authority, the local authority takes on the role of 'corporate parent'. Being a corporate parent means doing everything you can for every child in the council's care and every care leaver, to give them the opportunities that other children get.



As leader you have a particular role in championing corporate parenting and challenging councillors, officers and partners to do their best for children in care and care experienced young people – get everyone thinking through the lens of 'if this was my child'."

Councillor Steve Darling, Leader, Liberal Democrat Group and Former Leader of Torbay Council 2019-2023

Every councillor and officer of the local authority is a corporate parent with the statutory responsibility to act for and care for that child in the same way that a good parent would. As their community representatives, all councillors have a crucial role to play in doing all they can to support children in care to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. It is important that councillors believe in children and young people in care and care leavers and fight their corner.

As leader, you can model and champion active corporate parenting and support the LMCS to embed a strong approach by setting the tone for political colleagues and relentlessly asking and encouraging others to ask ‘would this be good enough for my child?’ You should make sure that all councillors understand their corporate parenting responsibilities, and how they can fulfil them, but particularly councillors taking up roles on corporate parenting boards, scrutiny committees and Cabinet. The LGA **e-learning (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/leadership-workforce-and-communications/councillor-development/councillor-e-learning>)** module focused on corporate parenting is a good starting point which could provide a useful induction or refresher.

You can also use your unique position to encourage the wider community and partners to support the council’s responsibilities as corporate parents.

Key questions for leaders:

- Are councillors aware of and acting on their duties as corporate parents and ensuring corporate parenting has a profile across the council and partnership?
- Are Cabinet members championing children in care and care leavers and considering their needs in their respective portfolio areas?
- Are opportunities created for children in care and care leavers to meet with or present to the council?
- How are the needs of children with complex needs and disabilities considered, and how are they supported to be involved in their local communities and to transition to adult services?

In Our Shoes project in Waltham Forest

“In Waltham Forest we are focused on making sure that we learn from young people who have grown up in care to make sure that they have the support they need. We have made experience of care a protected characteristic and the ‘In Our Shoes’ project gives care leavers the opportunity to tell senior leaders and managers directly about their perspectives.”

Councillor Grace Williams, Leader, Waltham Forest Council

“If these are the people making decisions about our lives, they really need to understand what life looks like for us.”

Young person participating in the ‘In Our Shoes’ project

The voices of children and young people, and parents and carers

As leader you will want to understand what life is like for children in your community and be assured that their views and aspirations, and those of parents and carers, are reflected in policy making and service delivery. Ofsted will also look at how children’s voices are heard, captured and acted upon.

“ The Leader can choose to promote a child-friendly approach to all policy making and services in the council. This includes making sure that young people’s views are heard in all policy making - not just children’s services - and introducing a strong focus on children’s outcomes in strategic planning.”

Councillor Louise Gittins, Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board and Leader Cheshire West and Chester

Key questions for leaders:

- How do you and your Cabinet hear from children and young people and know what they think, experience and want?
- Are you confident there are effective forums and mechanisms for children, including those that are or have been in the care of the council, to make their views known, and shape the system that supports them?
- Are members, especially the LMCS, actively seeking the views of children and young people, for example through visits to children’s homes, visits to frontline services, attendance at events, and hearing and responding to feedback from children and young people.

- Are the voices and views of parents/carers, children and young people shaping and supporting the strategic ambition for SEND and alternative provision in your area?

“ Our work with children and young people in Waltham Forest is focused around improving their life chances and making sure they have the tools they need to succeed. Involving parents and carers at every step and ensuring their voices are heard means that children get the very best start in life. When parents and carers know that we share their values, we can work together to really make a difference.”

Councillor Grace Williams, Leader, Waltham Forest Council

Community leadership and communications

All leaders should have plans in place to deal responsively with any high-profile cases, an Ofsted judgement or issues that affect children and young people and their safety within the community. If your children's services are in the spotlight, you will need to be clear on your role and that of your strategic quartet in communicating key messages to communities, partners, staff and businesses.

In times of crisis, it is often the leader, rather than LMCS that will be at the front of the reputational, organisational, emotional and financial fall out, and lead internal and external communications messages.

Your communications team should be brought into all discussions from the beginning so they can support you with honest, impartial advice about the issues and its possible implications. If a case is likely to attract significant media attention, including national interest, you are likely to know about this several weeks in advance and should be ready to respond. The LGA can also offer support in times of crisis, including with communications and media management. This could include peer support, media relations support, and connections to councils that have been through similar issues.

Finance

Children's services present one of the biggest reputational and financial risks to a council if things go wrong. As such children's services financial issues need to be a key consideration within a council's corporate financial framework.

Alongside the general challenges of running children's services it is widely understood and accepted that children's social care and SEND funding pressures compounded by increased need, cost and demand, represent one of the most pressing local government financial concerns at present. The key issue for leaders working with the CE is to ensure that children's services spending is sustainable in both service as well as financial terms. Financial volatility within the service may be an indicator of a loss of management grip, but such are the current pressures that is not a given. Leaders should satisfy themselves as to why budget variances are arising, positive or negative. In particular, ensure you are updated on the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

It is well evidenced that service failure is hugely expensive, as well as widely damaging to your authority. The cost of recovery from failure will certainly outweigh the cost of avoidance of failure, and there is a clear role for preventative services in getting support to children and families as early as possible before their needs escalate.

The Executive members for Finance and Children's Services should both understand children's services finance, provide challenge in terms of budget setting and monitoring, and be able to respond to matters as part of the democratic process.

Key questions for leaders:

- Is your budget aligned to your vision for children's services?
- Has the council appropriately invested and prioritised resources for vulnerable children?
- Is there active involvement and attendance by all senior leaders and politicians at all corporate boards and committees in which key decisions for children are made?
- Is there a political commitment to supporting children's services and an understanding that addressing the needs of young people at an early age can reduce costs for other departments?
- Are health partners making appropriate contributions to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND?

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Resources and further information

✓ Further resources

LGA Principal Advisers, Children's Improvement (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/childrens-services/lga-principal-advisers-and-childrens-improvement-advisers-region>) Advisers and SEND Improvement Advisers can provide information on the support available from the LGA.

Leadership Essentials and Leadership Enhanced (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/leadership-essentials>) training courses for children's services political leaders providing learning and networking opportunities

LGA Step Ahead campaign (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/step-ahead>) aims to improve direct support to care leavers, as well as improving the support provided to councils in supporting their care leavers. The LGA also offers **corporate parenting support (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/childrens-services/corporate-parenting-lga-support-development-and-training-offer>)** to councils.

Must Know: Children's services guide to effective cross-council working (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/must-know-childrens-services-guide-effective-cross-council-working#introduction>) is guidance for corporate leaders on strengthening a whole council approach to delivering effective children's services.

LGA's E-learning platform: Interactive online training modules on a range of topics and skills including an introduction to children's services, corporate parenting and early years. (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/leadership-workforce-and-communications/councillor-development/councillor-e-learning>)

ISOS Partnership: A maturing approach to children's services improvement: updating the key enablers of progress (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ce55a5ad4c5c500016855ee/t/651edbf2f0956b3554d485f0/1696521205313/LGA+children%27s+services+improvement+refresh+final+report+for+publication.pdf>)- update to a 2016 research project undertaken by the ISOS Partnership and commissioned by the LGA reviewing the seven key enablers of children's services improvement. A useful framework for considering a whole council approach to supporting improvement.

Top ten tips for DCSs on building an effective system of SEND and Alternative Provision (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/childrens-services/top-ten-tips-directors-childrens-services-building-effective-system>)

SEND and Alternative Provision: key questions for the LMCS

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271429/directors_of_child_services_-_stat_guidance.pdf