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Must Know: Children's services guide to effective cross- council working



This guidance has been developed for each of the following areas: finance, human resources (HR), information technology (IT) and legal. The intention is to further support and strengthen the development of a strong corporate and whole council approach to delivering effective services for children.

[Children and young people](#)

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LGA

Introduction

If you would like a pdf version of this guide, go to 'print this page' and choose 'save as pdf' as your destination.

It has been found that in high-performing children's services there is a strong corporate and whole council approach to children's services which is achieved through the active involvement of all senior leaders within forums where key decisions for all children are made.

As a senior leader this tool will help you to consider and assess different areas in your corporate area and their connection to achieving best outcomes for children and their families.

It is important to note that there is much more that could have been included in this guidance but the intention is to provide a starting point and a focus that then allows discussion and planning that reflects the local context. Some of the prompts and statements in this document describe practices that are embedded in many councils but they are not necessarily in place everywhere. Best practice has been shared so that you can reflect how these ways of working could apply to your council.

Section one: A guide for chief executives and their corporate leadership team

Chief executive's role in strengthening common vision and joined up working for children

The director of children's services and lead member have statutory responsibilities for delivering effective children's services and championing for improved outcomes for children and young people. The chief executive also has a crucial role to ensure the whole council supports children and young people and that corporate directors and the services they lead play an active role in this. This is multi-faceted, and it is crucial to reflect on the following:

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?

Further information about children's services specifically developed for local authority chief executives can be found in the '**must know: children's services guide**' [<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/must-know-childrens-services>]. This will support further support you in ensuring that there is a strong corporate and whole-council approach to support children.

Questions to consider: strengthening a common purpose

Do your directors/ heads understand their areas/ teams roles and responsibilities when supporting children and young people as a whole council approach?

How do the senior leaders understand challenges/ barriers experienced by those working in children's services and vice versa?

What is your assessment of the current working relationship between directorates/areas?

Reflect on what works well for your local authority in terms of the different areas/ directorates working together with the aim of achieving best outcomes for children and families?

How does the wider partnership across the SEND system work with effective common purpose?

What needs to happen to support you in furthering and strengthening the common purpose with your senior leadership team?

How do corporate directors support the chief executive?

It is essential, that the corporate management team operate as one cohesive unit and support each other in the delivery of the council services. The council is reliant on the whole team performing not only in their own specialist area but as one team. As a member of the corporate leadership team, you should ensure you support the chief executive and your fellow senior leadership team colleagues. This moves away from a silo culture and support with effective cross-council working. When supporting colleagues adopt a critical friend approach and at leadership meetings show an interest in all items not just those affecting your area of responsibility. This is particularly important in areas where key decisions about children are made.

Line of sight for the chief executive/ head of paid service on council activities

There should be an understanding between the chief executive and each member of the senior leadership team as to how they will operate and indeed, similar arrangements should also be agreed between all members of the senior leadership team. The chief executive should have line of sight of every service, by being provided

timely performance information and reporting relating to all services. This can include financial information, workforce data, caseloads etc and should where possible include trends and comparator information. The chief executive will also receive their own information via elected members, written complaints, Members of Parliament etc.

Questions to consider for strengthening a common purpose:

Is there an understanding of what role your area/ directorate plays when working with children's services and how do you communicate this to the chief executive/ head of paid service?

How does your directorate/ service area contribute at corporate boards and committees in which key decisions for children are made?

How are the voices of children and young people and their families heard and contributing to the common purpose?

If you are a DCS:

How do you ensure effective line of sight to the chief executive/ head of paid service?

How do you ensure the chief executive/ head of paid service understands what is working well and challenges in relation to working effectively with Finance, HR and Legal?

What needs to happen to support you in developing and strengthening the common purpose for achieving best outcomes for children and their families between senior leaders?

Section two: A guide for children's services and finance senior leaders for effective cross working

What a director of children's services and their senior team need to know about finance:

The difference between revenue and capital

Revenue is the day-to-day expenditure such as staffing costs, children's placements, adult care costs which is funded through fees and charges, council tax and government support. For many education services, government support comes via the Dedicated Schools Grant which is provided by the Department for Education. In addition, children's services have pooled budgets and joint funding agreements with health.

Capital is where the expenditure will create an asset that is expected to last more than a year, such as building a children's home. The funding of such projects can be from government grants, borrowing by the council (like a mortgage) or through the council's own resources such as a revenue contribution. When a capital asset is sold, it is recognised as a capital receipt but unlike revenue which can fund capital expenditure, capital cannot ordinarily without specific direction be used to support day-to-day revenue expenditure.

What is the section 151 officer?

Under Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972, every council must make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and appoint one of their officers to have responsibility for the administration of those affairs. They are also known in law as the chief financial officer (CFO) but in practice have many different job titles. The CFO is required by law to be a member of a specified professional body, one of which is The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). The governance guidelines in the CIPFA statement on the role state that the CFO should report directly to the chief executive and be a member of the leadership team with a status at least equivalent to other members. The statement also requires that if different organisational arrangements are adopted the reasons should be explained publicly in the authority's annual governance report, together with how these deliver the same impact.

As the council's nominated officer responsible for effective financial administration, the CFO also has a role in ensuring value for money. They will also usually manage the relationship with the council's external auditors. The CFO has a statutory responsibility (under S114 of the Local Government Act 1989) to report to the council under certain circumstances, including where it appears to them that expenditure will exceed available resources in any year.

Budget approval

It is a statutory requirement that the council budget, revenue and capital, are approved by the full council. This usually takes place in February in each year for the forthcoming financial year starting on 1 April. The proposed budget is initially

considered by the council's executive or the appropriate committee, (if operating a committee system) who make recommendations to the full council. The approval of the budget does not need to be unanimous but by simple majority, usually by the ruling political group on the council. It is important to note, there are different rules in place for Mayoral authorities.

It is a legal requirement that the revenue budget is a balanced budget. In other words, the budgeted expenditure must be matched by the expected level of income after planned use of reserves. Since reserves can only be used once, it follows that in the medium-long term, the council must spend in line with expected levels of income. Income includes specific grants and fees and charges into account as well as Council Tax, and government support through revenue support grant, business rates. For the Capital Programme the sources of funding must be identified.

A specific control in the budget process is a report from the S151 officer known as the Section 25 report (as required by Section 25, Local Government Act (2003)) which advises the full council on the robustness of the estimates and on the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves.

Children's services budget setting

The council's budget should flow from its corporate plan and regard should be made to the agreed corporate objectives for children's services. It may be that any proposed expenditure which does not meet corporate objectives or is not for statutory responsibilities, could be identified for a saving.

The ability to predict demand for services and track the market for placements is crucial for budget setting. However, some budget pressures are extremely difficult to predict, for example:

The cost and sufficiency of placements for children.

Increasingly complex care packages for children with Special Educational Needs and disabilities (SEND).

Unexpected demand for example through the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children dispersal scheme.

New and unfunded duties/burdens are such as extending SEND duties up to 25 years of age.

Recruitment and retention of staff and agency costs.

For this reason, councils should include contingency planning as part of setting budgets. It is important the DCS and CFO work together in the context of invest to save priorities which might include expanding in house residential provision. In addition, it is important to work with key partners of the council such as health to maximise important contributions to packages of care.

For many services, the higher the level of spending, the better quality service is provided. Children's social care is unusual in that some of the higher costs are most commonly associated with some of the poorer practice. Councils with 'inadequate' or 'requiring improvement' judgements from Ofsted are usually among the highest spenders and only some of this is associated with the cost of improvement.

Budget monitoring

Good financial management is based on sound budget monitoring. On an ongoing basis, as expenditure is committed, the forecast spend is measured against the agreed budget. This will then be summarised into a report on no less than a monthly basis. It is then important, that as the senior leadership team you are involved in the monitoring process and provide realistic and achievable budget projections.

Social care budgets are often described as 'demand led' - the council is obliged to respond to the need for services as and when it is identified and even to actively seek out need. All budgets are 'demand led' in one sense or another; the real issue with social care is how councils are legally obliged to meet demand. Effective triage and assessment are key to ensuring that children's needs are addressed safely with an appropriately costed package.

Where there are variances, positive and negative, these need to be investigated to identify any underlying trends. Where a variance is identified, then there should be discussion between finance and children's services colleagues to consider any appropriate remedial action. It is likely that significant variances will require Member approval and it is not unusual for such variances to be reported to Members in a revenue budget trends report.

Medium Term Financial Plan

The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) also sometimes called Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), outlines the forward projections for the next few years in respect of the council's budget. It is prepared for the whole Council but it is critical that the senior leadership team of children's services has input into this (like the annual

budget preparation) and help to identify future pressures and achievable savings. Issues such as general trends in demography, economic forecasts and forthcoming legislation should be reflected in the MTFs. Given the significant financial pressures facing local government, it is normal for these projections to identify the need for savings at a corporate level over the forthcoming years. It is for each council, members and officers to determine how that budget gap is bridged but it is essential that plans are considered at the earliest opportunity and that a corporate approach is adopted.

Reserves

Councils do hold revenue reserves which reflect money set aside for spending against known and unknown risks, delays in spending incoming grants and, sometimes, members priorities.

It is good financial management to review reserves on at least an annual basis to ensure those held for earmarked purposes remain appropriate and as a matter of good practice the senior leadership team of the council, including the DCS, should be involved in that review.

Questions to consider for strengthening a common purpose:

Do children's services understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to finance?

How do children's services understand challenges and barriers experienced by those in finance team?

How does children's services communicate the challenges and also needs of all children and their families in a way that finance understands?

What is your assessment of the current working relationship between directorates?

Reflect on what works well for your council in terms of finance and children's services working together?

Consider if you are maximising the contributions from health and schools in supporting Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)'s and SEND needs.

Have you defined the needs/ requirements for children's services at present and in the future? These can be technical as well as outcome based.

What needs to happen to support you in furthering and strengthening the common purpose between your directorates to achieve better outcomes for children and their families?

What a Section 151 Officer and their senior team need to know about children's services:

Children's services present one of the biggest risks to a council, both reputational and financial, if matters go wrong. Children's services financial issues cannot be overlooked and have to be considered within a council's corporate financial framework.

Each council will regularly produce dashboards of key performance data for children's services and normally this is accompanied by an analysis of the data and benchmarking against other councils or national averages. In addition, each council is a member of a Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance (RIIA) who undertake regular collection of children's services data from the region. This information which is shared by the DCS will provide a comparison with other councils in the region. This type of information can be really important in identifying potential areas of increasing demand and therefore spend and also how this compares with other places. But it is important that you work with colleagues in children's services to understand this performance information. Below are some of the key areas of focus for a CFO.

Placements

A number of councils have encountered financial difficulties because they have not been able to adopt a strategic approach to purchasing placements for children in care and those requiring specialist educational placements (often called a commissioning or sufficiency strategy). In other words, they have gone to the market for a placement and have to accept how the market responds, which may or may not provide value for money.

However, it should be noted at present, there is an acute placement shortage both nationally and locally especially for those children with multiple and complex needs. Although work is being undertaken by commissioning and placement teams to source placements at good value, the market is currently led by providers. Many councils

have taken the strategic decision to build their own or increase their residential provision to manage the shortage. It is important the DCS and CFO work together in the context of invest to save.

As CFO you will want to ensure the council has appropriate procurement practices in place, to ensure that when a placement is needed that financial value for money is being achieved. It should also be noted that some of these high-cost placements are due to complex health needs and as such costs shared and placement reviewed with health partners as appropriate. It must be recognised that the financial cost of a placement is not a consideration in the placement of a child, the needs of the child are paramount, but good forward planning should help to ensure value for money.

As CFO, you and your team should work with colleagues in children's services to review the existing high-cost residential and educational placements. This will help to understand why these are high-cost places and to identify improvements in your Council's procedures. This is to secure better value for money in the future. This exercise should not be seen as a means to reducing the cost of the existing placements unless it is in the best interests of the child which are always of paramount importance.

Support to families

Councils want to support families at the early stages of concern. This can often provide better outcomes for the child but also avoid the long-term costs of supporting children on child protection plans or coming into the care of the council. This approach is also one of the key recommendations in the Social Care Review (2022) in which it is proposed that there is a move to establishing more early support for families. However, it is difficult to continue to commit to sustaining these types of services when difficult short term budget decisions need to be made. As CFO, you will want to be aware of the council's arrangements for supporting families, how this dovetails with the council's corporate approach but also the evidence that supports this focus on early help/intervention.

Staffing

There is currently a national shortage of professionals to support children's services. This is not just social workers but extends to other professionals such as educational psychologists, SEN workers, health visitors etc. This has resulted in a number of councils undertaking initiatives to recruit staff but this can often leave gaps in capacity in neighbouring councils. A significant proportion of the children's workforce is also now provided through employment agencies and this has increased staffing costs for councils. The CFO will want to receive timely and accurate information on the levels of agency staff in children's services and the additional cost of this. If the council has a

high level of agency staff, it is suggested that you work with colleagues in children's services and HR to determine whether alternative solutions exist. This could include ensuring that there is a robust recruitment and retention strategy in place which addresses practitioner sufficiency as well as reviewing how the strategy is being implemented.

The need to stop it going wrong

Experience across the sector indicates that when a council receives an 'Inadequate' judgement from Ofsted the council's costs will increase significantly. This is because there is a need to deliver an improvement plan that will quickly deliver improved outcomes for children. This plan will be underpinned by a statutory improvement notice and progress will be closely monitored by Ofsted and DfE. The costs will run into several millions of pounds and will last for at least three years. It is therefore critical that the CFO works closely with children's services and the corporate management team including the chief executive, to ensure that effective services for children can be delivered.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Under the current arrangements (recognising the Government is consulting on changes), children and young people with SEND will have access to Special Educational Needs (SEN) support through their educational setting. However, some children and young people may have more complex needs that cannot be met through SEN support. They are eligible for an assessment for an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), the plan identifies educational, health and social needs and sets out the additional support required to meet those needs. The EHCP is funded by DfE through the High Needs Block (HNB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant. There has been an increase in EHCP numbers nationally and there is also an increase in the numbers of councils exceeding the funding available in this funding block and operating a deficit. The government is working with those authorities to alleviate the position through projects such as Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value in SEND.

Where council spending exceeds the DfE grant in this way, the deficit accumulates over time and can become a major problem for the financial position in children's services and corporately. It is essential that both the senior leadership team of children's services and the CFO have a shared understanding of the position in HNB spending and have plans to contain it within budget. However, it should be noted that very few councils are within budget and as such focus should be on whether risk can be mitigated in this area.

Corporate parent

When a child or young person comes into the care of the council or is under 25 and was looked-after by the council for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday, the council becomes their corporate parent. The CFO, as a senior officer of the council, has a collective responsibility, alongside elected members, other officers and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for these children and young people. It is important, that you work with the director of children's services and the senior leadership team to achieve this aim.

Risk Management

Risk management is critical in any organisation and it is the responsibility of all managers. There should be a risk register and risk management arrangements in place within children's services that identifies and manages risks at local level. The DCS and their management team will oversee this risk register. Significant risks, including those that have a corporate impact should then also be reflected in the strategic risk register which is overseen and managed by the corporate leadership team, including the DCS. An accountable officer, usually but not always the CFO, takes responsibility for overseeing the effectiveness of risk management. It is critical that the risk register is regularly updated, and that regard is made to it in making decisions including budget decisions.

Internal Audit

It is the responsibility of managers in the children's services department to action recommendations drawn to their attention by internal audit. The chief internal auditor will monitor the delivery of recommendations and report accordingly to the audit committee. It is also important for children's services to work with internal audit to shape the audit programme and focus on those areas that would really benefit from an independent check.

Government grants

The DfE regularly provides both on-going and one-off grants to support children's services. It is not uncommon for these grants to have very detailed criteria as to their use and it is important that the CFO is aware of the grants being received and that these are being used in accordance with the grant conditions, thus, avoiding any subsequent difficulties particularly at the time of an internal or external audit. This is of particular importance given a number of grant allocations are approved in public forum, for example, schools forum.

Partnership working

There are many opportunities and benefits from public services working collaboratively and there are also many examples of where budgets from different public sector organisations have been pooled or aligned to support this approach. As the CFO you should be aware of all the joint arrangements between children's services and external partners and consider how will you satisfy yourself that appropriate governance exists, so as to ensure sound budgetary control.

The relationship between finance and children's services

Due to the size, risk and complexity of children's services, a close working relationship with finance is essential. There are a variety of models used, but typically will include finance staff providing hands on support to children's services managers, and a senior financial professional (that reports to the CFO) sitting in the children's services management team. This individual should have specialised knowledge and understanding of children's services finance.

Working with members on children's services finance

The portfolio holders for finance and children's services should both understand children's services finance. Working with the senior leadership team of children's services you should ensure that they have that understanding, provide challenge in terms of budget setting and monitoring and be able to respond to matters as part of the democratic process.

Questions to consider- strengthening a common purpose

Is there a clear understanding of what role finance plays when working with children's services?

How do the finance team understand challenges and barriers experienced by those in children's services?

How does finance communicate their challenges and also requirements to children's services?

What is your assessment of the current working relationship between directorates?

What is your assessment of the current working relationship with key partners, such as health where joint funding is expected.

Reflect on what works well for your council in terms of finance and children's services working together?

Have you defined the needs/ requirements for children's services at present and in the future? These can be technical as well as outcome based.

What needs to happen to support you in furthering and strengthening the common purpose between your directorates in order to achieve best outcomes for children and their families?

Section three: A checklist for senior leaders and their teams: HR and children's services

What a leader or manager of HR services and director of children's services and their senior teams need to know about effective cross council working

Effective HR processes and systems are crucial to support with workforce recruitment, attraction, retention and engagement. This is particularly important in children's services due to current workforce challenges experienced by many councils. Therefore, experienced leaders of HR and children's services have highlighted the areas that need to be considered to enable effective collaboration across services, with a view to ensuring children's services have a skilled, experienced and sustainable workforce.

Leadership and organisational culture

Leadership and organisational culture is a crucial aspect for any council. Leadership is key to influencing and driving a common purpose in any organisation, and organisational culture supports this by eliciting the views of the workforce to ensure that the council's aims are met. As such it is important as senior leaders within HR and children's services that you are involved in developing policies and strategies and evaluating effectiveness within the workforce.

Key questions to consider:

- Is there an overall people strategy for the whole council?
- Do HR and children's services meet regularly to ensure priorities align and are considered in all areas of HR delivery for the council?
- Have you reviewed the following documents? These documents cover both children's and adults social care, although focus of this tool is for children's many of the findings/guidance will cover both areas.

1. The Standards for Employers of Social Workers

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/standards-employers-social-workers->

[national-report-summary-2021](#)

2. [Social Work Health Check \[https://www.local.gov.uk/new-social-work-health-check-2020\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/new-social-work-health-check-2020)

- Do you understand the barriers and challenges that are getting in the way of social work practitioners doing their best work with children and their families?
- Have you reflected on how changes and innovations will support social work practitioners and other professionals with their work with children and their families?
- Thinking ahead, the recommendations in **[the Review of Social Care May 2022 \[https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care\]](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care)** and the **[SEND Green Paper March 2022 \[https://sendreview.campaign.gov.uk/\]](https://sendreview.campaign.gov.uk/)** will impact on all HR functions/ areas. Have you started to consider the following:

1. Early Years Progression Framework relating to career progression of social workers.
2. Strengthened leadership programmes.
3. Linking learning opportunities with the knowledge and skills statement to create a wider social care workforce
4. More emphasis on early intervention and prevention as opposed to a reliance on statutory services for all children including those with SEND.
5. The role of differently qualified workers to support social workers (either in holding larger than average caseloads or the appropriate/safe step down of case work to these workers).
6. Proposed qualifications for SEND case workers.

Workforce planning

Workforce planning is the overarching principle that supports organisations with recruiting, training and deploying employees. However, there are many instances in which this planning does not take place or is not effective which means that there is not enough appropriately skilled staff to fill available positions when a need arises. It is crucial that workforce planning process is strengthened and a robust Workforce Strategy and Action Plan is developed to underpin this area.

Key questions to consider:

Do children's services understand their responsibilities in relation to workforce planning across the breadth of the whole children's workforce?

Are there shared workforce planning processes, tools, initiatives that may affect future workforce design principles with those in children's services?

How does HR provide advice to colleagues on future and current skill mixes, as well as how different competency levels are and should be defined across children's services?

Does the children's services workforce strategy and action plan feed into the workforce strategy for the whole council?

How is the workforce strategy and action plan for children's services kept up to date to ensure it meets the needs identified in your service area?

When reviewing and strengthening workforce planning:

1. Who is the project lead for workforce planning in children's services and how are they planning to work with HR?
2. How often will this be reviewed?
3. Have you set governance arrangements in place to ensure the plan will be delivered?

Recruitment and attraction

Recruitment and attraction of permanent social work practitioners is a national challenge experienced by councils. It is important to have an understanding of current recruitment practice, have a breadth of initiatives that support with opening up recruitment streams and analyse trends and patterns to understand the council's workforce data. This will support to understand the issues impacting on the workforce to ensure worker sufficiency in the short and long term.

Key questions to consider:

Does the current recruitment and attraction strategy for the council meet the needs of children's social care? Is this a corporate priority?

Is there an experienced HR business partner to work with children's services to better understand and meet HR objectives within their Workforce Strategy and Action Plan?

Do current recruitment practices meet the requirements of children's services?

How long does the recruitment practice take? Is it fit for purpose and how do you communicate this to your HR teams? It is important to have timely processes in place as it is crucial to have social workers to execute statutory responsibilities, otherwise this could have impact on children.

Do recruitment processes take into account timeframes for DBS applications? Is there understanding of which posts need a DBS?

Are there review mechanisms in place for onboarding and induction processes?

Do you analyse why social workers are leaving the workforce? Conversely, do you understand why social workers choose to stay with the authority?

Do managers conduct regular stay interviews, rather than one off exit interviews?

How do you communicate children's services priorities in terms of short and long-term planning for recruitment and attraction across HR and the whole council? Is this a corporate priority?

Are the teams responsible for recruitment and attraction aware that learning and development of social worker needs, are to be considered as part of on-going strategy to retain social workers in the long term?

What is your Employer Value Proposition (EVP)? How does it support you to promote your council? Think about why you are passionate about your role and why you work at your council.

How long does the recruitment practice take? Is it fit for purpose and how do you communicate this to your HR teams?

Do you review and analyse sickness and absence levels? How do these feed into overall approach to retaining practitioners?

How are disciplinary and grievance processes managed? Does this impact on practitioner retention?

Do you have mechanisms in place to engage with the future workforce (T Level Industry Placements, Work Experience, Career fairs, build relationships)?

Talent management

Talent management is key to support attracting, identifying, developing, engaging, retaining and deploying individuals who are particularly valuable for an organisation. In this case, social work practitioners as they undertake a breadth of statutory duties on behalf of the council. However, there are a number of challenges that can impact strategies and action plans focused on talent management. For example, some of the approaches require significant investment in terms of both supporting practitioners learning but also financial costs, it can be difficult to backfill posts and there is a need for evaluation data to review effectiveness of programmes to ensure best value for the council.

Key questions to consider:

Is there a talent spotting/succession planning strategy? Is children's services part of the overall corporate framework/approach to talent management?

Have you got an understanding of the children's services workforce strategy and action plan in relation to apprentices, returners, grow your own approaches and international recruitment?

Do you understand how children's services forecast workforce capacity and capability projections across all areas?

How does HR support children's services in relation to building relationship with external organisations, for example, recruitment agencies, local universities etc.

How do current HR policies make allowances to support these initiatives?

What is your strategy in relation to apprentices, returners, grow your own approaches and international recruitment?

How do you assess the current and future skills needed within children's services?

Learning and development

Learning and development is crucial for the continuing professional development (CPD) of social workers as per registration requirements as set out by Social Work England. Regular CPD also ensures that social work practitioners are able to implement learning into their practice with children and families. There are specific issues that need to be considered when strengthening current CPD for practitioners which include, specific career pathways for social workers, linking training opportunities to the reality of day-to-day practice and ensuring targeted mentoring and coaching for individuals.

Key questions to consider:

As part of the learning and development plan for the whole council, are those with professional registration requirements such as social work practitioners and educational psychologists considered?

Does the learning and development team have a broad understanding of social work practice and learning needs as well as other professionals across the children's workforce?

Does the council-wide learning development team engage with children's services?

Are training courses varied and reviewed often? Are they targeting the skills that the social care workforce would need now and in the future?

What do Assessed and Supported Year In Employment (ASYEs) say about the support and development opportunities from the authority?

Does your council have a learning and development plan for new employees?

How do you communicate that specific and targeted learning and development opportunities is an important driver in improving

practice with children and their families?

How do appraisals support the CPD of practitioners? And how does supervision link to CPD of practitioners?

Retention, engagement and wellbeing

Social worker retention, engagement and well-being is crucial to support retention of staff within children's services. Alongside the council-wide wellbeing offer, children's services will also develop one-to-one and group supervision to support social workers to help them manage the cumulative effects of the work they do.

Key questions to consider:

How are staff in children's services linked into council-wide engagement strategies?

Is there an understanding of the specific engagement strategies used in children's services?

Are the need of the children's services workforce considered within well-being initiatives and policies?

Do you analyse the specific underlying reasons for grievances, disciplinaries, exit interviews etc? What action is taken?

Do you share information with the wider corporate leadership team in relation to children's services practitioner engagement and well-being?

How do you communicate results from the social work health check within the directorate/wider council?

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is directly linked to ensuring that everyone has equal access to opportunities. This includes a chance to celebrate and share differences to support with learning and better decision making in organisations.

However, many organisations issues in relation to EDI are often cited as a reason for workers leaving their employment. There is anecdotal evidence that many social work practitioners are citing EDI as a reason for moving from permanent to agency work

Key questions to consider:

Is the EDI strategy embedded across the council including children's services?

What process do you have in place to understand the needs and concerns in relation to EDI for those in children's services?

How well do those in children's services understand how the EDI policies relate to them?

How have the policies been embedded within the children's services?

What is the profile of the workforce? Including ethnicity, age, gender, disability? How is this information used to inform initiatives/policies etc.

Agency workers

The use of agency staff has become common in recent years. Some of this can be seen as positive as it can enable councils to quickly fill vacancies with experienced practitioners. However, there are increasing challenges in recruitment and retention across the children's workforce and many councils now have significant numbers of staff that are agency workers. The cost of using agency workers is much higher than is the case for a permanent, employed workforce but there are also other potential issues regarding culture, consistency or practice, understanding of a council's approach/practice model etc.

Key questions to consider:

What percentage of the children's workforce is agency staff? Is this reviewed regularly? Do you understand the costs that are incurred? Do you have a strategy/ plan in place to move away from agency use?

Does HR or finance lead on agency contracts? How do they work with children's services to review need? Are budgets for agency workers aligned?

Do the agency staff arrangements agree with any agreed corporate framework for agency staff? If not, consideration may need to be given to amending the corporate framework to meet the needs of children's services?

Is there a clear understanding of the regional Memorandum of Co-operation on agency staff?

Are there opportunities for agency workers to become permanent workers?

Who holds responsibility for managing agency contracts? Are budgets for agency workers aligned? Does the current agency agreement meet children's services identified need?

What is your understanding of IR35 arrangements and how these impact on workforce and Council liabilities? How is IR35 applied in your Council? Have you had discussions with Finance and Legal that arrangements accord with IR35?

Do you have any teams of managed social work services? How does this impact on budgets?

Total reward

Total reward is more than remuneration. It is a full reward package that should be considered in relation to recruitment, attraction and retention of social workers. With many councils experiencing an increasing number of social workers leaving the workforce either to become agency workers or pursue different careers it is important to think about all the benefits you can offer staff, for example, flexible working, free parking, working environment etc

Key questions to consider:

What does total reward mean for your council? How is this communicated to those in children's services to support with recruitment, attraction and retention of social workers?

How do you review what total reward benefits appeal to those in children's services?

Are social worker pay scales reviewed in line with other local Councils?

Do fixed term and permanent staff have flexible terms of employment?

How do you review what total reward benefits appeal to those in children's services?

Overarching questions to consider to strengthen a common purpose

Is there an understanding of what role HR plays when working with children's services?

Do children's services understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to HR?

What is your contribution to supporting a positive, inclusive learning culture?

Is there an understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced by the workforce in children's services?

How does HR communicate their challenges and also requirements to children's services?

What is your assessment of the current working relationship between service areas/teams?

Reflect on what works well for your council in terms of HR and children's services working together?

Have you defined the needs/requirements for children's services at present and in the future? These can be technical as well as outcome based.

What needs to happen to support you in developing and strengthening the common purpose between your service areas

in order to achieve best outcomes for children and their families?

Is there a corporate and/or senior leadership team strategic approach/support for recruitment and retention across children's services?

Reflect on what works well for your council in terms of HR and children's services working together?

Have you got a clear understanding of your future workforce requirements?

Useful links for recruitment

Local Government Association's Workforce Planning Team [\[https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-consultancy/lga-consultancy-workforce/workforce-planning\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-consultancy/lga-consultancy-workforce/workforce-planning) can support you with specific workforce planning challenges and next steps. Supporting documents available upon request from the team include; a simple guide to workforce planning and workforce planning maturity matrix.

Section four: A 'guide and checklist for senior leaders and their teams: IT and children's services

What a leader or manager of IT services and director of children's services and their senior teams need to know about effective cross council working

Effective IT systems support the collection of large amounts of data and information and how this can be used by professionals to make timely and appropriate decisions about support for children and families. These systems also allow managers to track performance across teams and services and identify key performance trends. How the workforce utilises and engages with IT can also enable a flexible, effective and dynamic working environment.

Initial conversations:

- It is crucial to establish a common language, define what you both mean by; risk, data, performance, information, technology, security. These can have different

meanings between service areas.

- What are the systems or applications currently in place, how are they used and who has management responsibility for them? This includes systems shared with multi-agency partners.
- What do IT and children's services need to know about one another in respect of roles and responsibilities? Examples include:
 1. Children's services are expected to provide data sets for Ofsted, Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Probation as part of children's, SEND and Youth Offending Services' inspections as well as the Department for Education (DfE) for national reporting.
 2. IT abide by corporate procurement rules which mean that IT corporate services must have approval of any equipment or system procured by council departments.

Both areas are responsible for ensuring that information is kept confidential and available when needed.

Follow-up considerations:

Reflecting on children's services use of IT, how do you know your technology, from 'core services' to specific children's services solutions supports the work being undertaken by your children's services practitioners at all levels? What are the critical success factors that would mean the overall system is fit for purpose, robust and resilient?

Have you defined the needs/requirements for children's services at present and in the future? These can be technical as well as outcome based.

Reflect on what works well for your council in terms of IT and children's services working together?

Do your overall plans/strategy for each service area speak to one another?

What needs to happen to support in furthering a common purpose? Establish an ongoing plan for working together

Applications and information

Experienced leaders of IT and children's services have highlighted the key areas that should be considered to ensure IT systems best support improvement in children's services.

The core delivery of children's services typically relies on an electronic case management system (CMS). The availability and reliability of this system is critical.

It is vital that the head of IT's responsibilities in helping to keep the CMS healthy and operating are clearly understood, in a similar manner to those of the DCS – who must understand the key components involved in this process.

CMSs capture data and information, normally using processes and workflows that empower the delivery of services and evidence the quality of practice plus its outcomes for children and families and impacts on financial spend and risk.

Practitioners work with the system through forms that have set data points and free text areas to be completed. The forms are linked together with a workflow. The data points must store accurate data, as this is relied upon to create performance reports.

There are different levels of reporting required from a system:

Statutory reporting used for inspection and national reporting for example, Annex A (a spreadsheet that shows supplementary child level information).

Local strategic reporting used by senior leaders and members.

Director reporting to give the DCS a 'temperature check' on their service and practice,

Management reporting for team managers to manage their teams.

Individual reporting so that case workers can manage their caseload.

Each report must come from a credible data source and be consistent. Building efficient forms and workflow is critical to accurate data collection, having clarity on where and how the data is stored will ensure the data is clean and credible, having a

robust change control process will ensure the data quality is good. Having clear lines of responsibility is vital.

When the CMS has healthy data, information should be available daily in an accurate format. Data and information audits should be part of the CMS lifecycle.

Healthy data is also important as the CMS in children's services is also linked to other systems such as the corporate finance system, which – as an example, supports payments to foster carers etc.

It should be noted that there are often large amounts of unstructured data but these datasets are not always routinely kept within the CMS. Depending on the structure of your council, the DCS often decides where the data is stored, yet this should be discussed with the Head of IT and the council's data protection officer. A joined-up approach can help ensure the security and resilience of data whilst also identifying opportunities to add future structure and efficiency.

It is important to consider which partner agencies also have access to the CMS and relevant data. Considerations should be given to how those agencies will access the system, how they and their staff will they be identified, and their access is controlled (e.g. read-only format if necessary). Rules need to be put in place around how they handle and process the information they receive, and that which they create – which must be accurate. This is crucial part of data protection responsibilities and duty of confidentiality.

The team around the CMS should be made up of practitioners, data analysts and application specialists. This team should keep the system technically healthy as well as practice compliant. This not only includes timescales in relation to statutory requirements but also data protection and information security rules. The underpinning technology – be that based on servers in house, or in the 'cloud' also needs careful and appropriate management to ensure resilience, robustness and security.

It should be noted in addition to the team mentioned above, when there is installation of a new CMS, or major changes to one there should be robust project management processes in place to ensure effective delivery within time and budget. The project must involve all necessary stakeholders, including children's services, IT and information governance.

Things go wrong when the CMS has no accountable owner, ownership is unclear (e.g. between the CMS team and IT), or when the team who are responsible for it see it through a purely technical lens. This could lead to the CMS being one that runs well

technically but does not meet the needs of children's services. This makes the case for defined ownership and accountability of the CMS across IT and children's services; IT can focus on ensuring the system runs well so that children's services are able to effectively use the system to support their work.

Key questions to consider:

What CMS does your council use?

Where is information captured?

How is/are the application/s and/or unstructured data managed and controlled within the local authority?

Who is the owner of the application/s and the data within?

Who sets up the applications and workflow?

Who manages and supports the technology underpinning the application/s?

Who controls what information/data goes in and comes out of the system?

How do you store and protect the data in the most efficient way? i.e. cloud, on premises, server etc. Have you discussed this with the Data Protection Officer?

How do you ensure the application/s is practice led and at the same time is data driven? This can be challenging but it is important to have the conversation to generate ideas on how this could be achieved.

What other systems gather information from the CMS (i.e. corporate finance)?

The Annex A is an important reporting tool for children's services, is the report fit for purpose? Is it regularly updated? Are there monthly trail runs to test its efficacy? What other reports/datasets need to be tested.

Do partner agencies have access to the CMS/other applications used in the council? Do they understand the council's data

reporting policies?

How have you minimised their access to only that which they need to do their jobs?

Do they have the necessary information governance and security protections in place? Who checks?

Data architecture

Data architecture often has split responsibilities across children's services and IT.

It is crucial that data architecture around applications considers interoperability. Where there are multiple case management systems (for example, for children's social care, youth offending, education within the council), there are opportunities for data to be used efficiently and effectively, as well as potentials for duplication, error and inefficiency.

To give an example, there should be consideration as to how the council gathers data from partners such as police, health and schools. There can often be discrepancies between the data held by such partners, and these need to be handled appropriately – leaving children's services with often complex datasets to work with. Where data is captured in multiple systems across multiple public sector organisations, such as for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), the challenge is magnified.

At the end of the day, children's services' delivery relies on data, and that data tells a story that is key to evidencing that the local authority is meeting a child's needs.

It must be clear to all parties where the data is stored and how the data will be reported. This may be more influenced by the DCS, but a common view and agreement in respect of this is crucial and should be reflected in the local authority's IT strategy. The use of corporate data stores and corporate reporting tools may be more appropriate. This would contribute to the CMS and other applications working in a consistent and complaint way.

Key questions to consider:

What are the local and national data sets required?

What are the challenges in using them?

How does the council access shared data from partners, are there processes in place to ensure this data is also healthy?

Is there secure system connectivity across internal and external agencies where there is a need for data sharing?

The SEND Green Paper (March 2022) recommends new national standards for ECHPs and a single IT system with partners, have you got processes in place for developing this together locally?

How will Parents/carers and young people access and input to their records?

Do these arrangements consider the Data Protection Act (2018) to ensure data is adequately protected?

Does the current system provide credible information?

Where is the data stored, and are responsibilities for it defined?

What are the agreed corporate reporting tools to support credible data sharing? This can include ensuring that information cannot be tampered with within the application.

Skills

The team around the CMS must have the right blend of skills. There should be a mix of data specialists with a background in children's services as well as application specialists and qualified practitioners. This will ensure the integrity and credibility of the data extracted from the system for the purposes of reporting. This team should be connected to their professional home too, for supervision and performance management. The data cannot be viewed in isolation, each number must be seen as a child and not a data point.

Key questions to consider:

Review the current skillset of the team that provide reporting across the Council?

Does the team have the same vision and purpose as the DCS?

Is there an understanding of how and why data is used in children's services?

Does the team have an understanding of safeguarding, the role of the Local Authority as a Corporate Parent and children's services practitioners evolving practice needs?

Who owns the accuracy of the data, which service does their role sit within?

How are changes/ issues managed?

Which service does the performance/ data reporting sit?

Ways of working

This area focusses on understanding the workforce, ensuring that practitioners have the tools that they need to do their work. This includes having access to external systems, fit for purpose secure IT equipment, appropriate and place specific WiFi. Ensuring the workforce has the right tools to do their job is crucial in supporting not only ensuring practitioners can carry out their duties effectively and efficiently but when the tools are not effective there can be a negative impact on recruitment and retention, internal/external auditing etc. As such, it is crucial for IT and children's services to work together in this area to understand the needs of the workforce.

Key questions to consider:

How well are practitioners' IT needs understood?

Are the work styles of the children's services workforce understood?

How might these/do these differ from other areas of the organisation?

Do practitioners have channels to share feedback?

Supplier and market engagement:

The relationship with vendors should be co-owned by IT, procurement and children's services, this ensures the vendor understands requirements from both a business and a technical perspective. This way of working moves relationships away from break fix

conversations, towards one that is more collaborative, coproduced and outcome focused.

Key questions to consider:

Who owns the relationship with the vendor and which service does their role sit within?

What ways do you ensure the vendor understands requirements from the local authority? And in turn, what are the requirements placed on the Council itself from the vendor?

How do you currently broker meaningful innovations and improvements from the supplier?

Are there SLAs and KPIs that are discussed outside of the contractual agreement, that focus on outcomes, development and improvement?

What is the supplier's responsibility for keeping their solution secure? Is it in line with any corporate standards and perceived risks?

What are the Data Protection implications of the supplier relationship?

Procurement

This area may have split responsibilities across children's services and IT as such it is important for both the head of IT and DCS to understand and consider points in this section.

It is important to be aware of the contractual period of the CMS system in place, as it is crucial work is undertaken at least two years before the contract expiry to determine how matters will move forward. If there was a need for a new CMS, then it would take approximately two years to procure and implement a new system.

There should also be planning in relation to the risks associated with migrating to a new system, for example, loss of information when migrating from an old to a new system.

Discussions of any prospective or new CMS or equipment needs to go through the corporate procurement process. This needs to ensure that there is oversight and approval from IT to bring about technical compatibility and also identify and reduce the risks of threats such as system failure, malicious access, malware and data breaches etc.

Key questions to consider:

How do you assure yourself that the CMS is fit for purpose? How do you review and evaluate effectiveness?

Are risks considered when considering a new CMS? e.g. Functionality, Process support, Data Protection, Information Security, Cyber Security?

Does your service area understand the corporate procurement policy in relation to clear assignment of ownership and responsibility?

Cyber security and resilience

Given the significant amount of confidential, personal sensitive data within children's services (especially that held in the CMS), and the need for continual access to it, cyber security and resilience are vital.

In addition to existing needs to protect data against unauthorised access, there are heightened risks due to cyber crime, and in particular the impact of ransomware attacks. It is vital therefore that the head of IT and DCS and their senior teams discuss these risks, protective measures that can be taken to avoid their impacting, and how the organisation will respond were the worst to happen.

It should be noted that 'ransomware' attacks, which traditionally have focussed on making data unavailable to organisations ("encrypting"), and then attempting to extort money to make it available ("decrypting") have evolved. It is not unusual for demands to now be made to prevent releases of information on to areas of the internet accessed by criminals ("the dark web") – double extortion. As such, prevention is always better than cure – however, the approach to defining a response to such an attack should be based on 'when' and not 'if'. Worst-case options must be considered.

It is vital therefore that the DCS considers the cyber security and resilience of their services, is informed as to threats and mitigations, and works to safeguard the ability to perform their statutory duties, whilst considering scenarios involving data loss or breach.

Key questions to consider:

- Do you have a clear view of roles and responsibilities related to cyber security, discussed between DCS and IT, and aligned with the council's overall approach?
- Are you, and your staff trained to identify, report, and act on suspicious e-mails and requests in relation to IT? Have they undertaken specific training on cyber security, and do they get updates as to current risks and threats?
- Do you have an up-to-date Business Continuity plan for the CMS and Children's Services operations that:
 - Covers a range of potential scenarios, including a reasonable worst case where your CMS may be unavailable for a significant and extended period of time? Considering both statutory deadlines and performance.
 - Has been tested to check its validity and that people understand their roles and responsibilities?
 - Has been reviewed based on current threats?
 - Has been communicated?
 - Includes a post-incident review, to enable learning and improvement.
- Is your data backed up, and do you understand:
 - How frequently it is backed up and where – and whether that location might be at risk from ransomware?
 - Whether backups have been tested to ensure they can be recovered, in full?
 - How much data could be lost if you had to restore, and how you would back-fill information onto the CMS?
- Have you considered, and do you manage cyber risks with your suppliers, by:
 - Asking how they are protecting services and data against attack?
 - Confirming how and when they will notify you around data breaches?
 - Including the management of cyber risks in procurements – for example, following the LGA's advice on embedding resilience in supply chains.
- How will you communicate with residents, multi-agency partners, and suppliers in the event of a cyber incident?

Further guidance on cyber security

NHS Data Security and Protection toolkit

[\[https://www.dsptoolkit.nhs.uk/\]](https://www.dsptoolkit.nhs.uk/) - this covers information sharing with Health, useful to consider for children's services.

Cyber Assessment Framework

[\[https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/collection/caf/cyber-assessment-framework\]](https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/collection/caf/cyber-assessment-framework) - a systematic approach to help you to assess cyber risks, this is an area councils will be assessed in the future.

10 steps to Data Security by the NCSC

[\[https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/collection/10-steps/data-security\]](https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/collection/10-steps/data-security) - includes guidance on resilient backups, which includes the '3-2-1' rule; at least three copies, on two devices and one offsite backup.

LGA's guidance on embedding resilience in supply chains

[\[https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology/cyber-security/embedding-cyber-resilience-local-government\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology/cyber-security/embedding-cyber-resilience-local-government).

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