



BUILDING THE BEST PLACES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES:

CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN NEW UNITARY COUNCILS

A HANDBOOK FOR DISTRICT
COUNCILS AS THEY **PLAN AND**
ESTABLISH CHILDREN'S SERVICES
IN NEW UNITARY COUNCILS

DCN
DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK

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FOREWORD

Every child has the right to be safe and cared for, succeed in learning, thrive and mature into adulthood, confident in contributing positively to their community.

Local authority Children's Services bring an amazing opportunity to champion all children in your place - typically 15-25% of your whole population - and to deliver services that protect children and make lives better for them and their families. It's also a big responsibility. It's well known that the environment for Children's Services is challenging. The size, complexity and cost of children's need for support has risen rapidly. This has coincided with a steep fall in national and local spending on early intervention.

Local Government Reorganisation gives us a chance to do things differently. Of course, reorganisation and disaggregation won't be easy. We need to approach it with a full understanding of the challenges and risks. But it opens the door for new councils that are bold and ready to put prevention, early intervention and place-based leadership at the heart of their approach to Children's Services.

District councils have a strong focus on place and prevention. This ethos is at the heart of a range of district services that are critical to better outcomes for children. Districts bring significant expertise and experience that can ensure every new council is a place where

children matter, where their views are acted on, and where they do well.

Children aren't going to care about size or form. What matters to them is how they feel about where they live. Whatever footprint the new council covers, it's important that children have a sense of connectivity with their local community and are ambitious about their future, with a supporting workforce confident they are making a difference.

The prevailing narrative is that big is beautiful and brings economies of scale. But there is an alternative lens. What matters is proximity to people and the places they live in, staying close to families and supporting them. Close, connected communities, coupled with strong, passionate and ambitious leadership, will give children the best possible start in life. This is where smaller councils can have a natural advantage.

We hope this report gives you the confidence to approach Children's Services in new unitary councils with optimism. In planning new unitary councils, let's embrace the challenge of building the best places for children and families. Places that will transform children's lives and life chances. There's no greater reward than that.



H Dalton

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Vice Chair and Health and Housing Spokesperson, District Councils' Network and Leader of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children's Services brings the privilege, the responsibility, and the accountability to transform lives and life-chances for children and families, with particular responsibilities for those in need of help, care and protection.

Investing in children is investing in future adults, so that they are proud of their place and ready to work, contribute and live independently.

→ WHAT'S IN THIS HANDBOOK FOR YOU?

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW >

Covering definitions, roles and responsibilities, internal structures, partnerships, inspections, risks and assurance.

ISSUES FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES >

Explaining the pressures currently affecting Children's Services and national policy changes in train and on the horizon.

INSIGHTS INTO EFFECTIVE CHILDREN'S SERVICES >

Highlighting the hallmarks and enablers for success, taking a look at size and scale, and examples of the value and difference district councils already make for children and families.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN NEW UNITARY COUNCILS >

Looking at approaches and examples of delivering and commissioning Children's Services on smaller footprints to help you decide which approach will work best in your local context.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL LEADERS >

Exploring learning from the sector and key takeaways.

RESOURCES >

Resources to draw on and a glossary of terms.



KEY MESSAGES

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) brings a real chance to reimagine children's services to build the best place to be a child, a place where communities thrive, families are supported to be the best they can be, and children are proud to call home.

It offers huge potential to join up support and services around children and families, unlock the real potential of place and transform lives.

It's an opportunity to think big for children, act local and build in a regional perspective.

- The starting point of any structure should be a clear understanding of places and localities. Local areas in which place matters do better.
- District councils bring significant skills and expertise in place-based leadership and local convening power. These are essential in supporting the shift towards prevention and earlier intervention and co-production with children and families.
- Councils on a smaller footprint can and often do perform well in Children's Services. The advantages of proximity to place are not outweighed by larger scale.

Investing in children is a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity:

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR THEM MEANS THEY WILL BE BETTER EQUIPPED TO STIMULATE OUR ECONOMY, CLOSE HEALTH GAPS AND INEQUALITIES, AND HELP US BE A MORE PRODUCTIVE, INNOVATIVE, EQUITABLE AND JUST SOCIETY.

- Shared services may work in the short term but have not worked well in relation to ICT and children's case management systems. Most shared services disaggregate within a few years of LGR.
- Regionalisation is an emerging option. It can help provide effective and efficient ways to commission and deliver some services even when a unitary council has a large service footprint. Regional arrangements are likely to align with mayoral devolution.
- Whatever model is chosen for delivering children's services and however much existing services are disaggregated, strong partnerships with the police, health, education, the voluntary sector and other agencies will be vital.
- Invest in building local prevention, community resilience and social regeneration early in LGR planning. This will support effective outcomes for children and families as well as align with the NHS 10-year plan and the likely direction of travel to emerge from the Casey review of adult social care.
- Key elements of effective children's services are effective leadership, strong management oversight and commitment to engaging with children and families collaboratively and responsively. Early appointment of a Director of Children's Services (DCS) and shadow cabinet can make a big difference.
- Effective engagement with children and families and multi-agency locality partnerships increase the likelihood that prevention effort will be successful.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW: THE ESSENTIALS TO KNOW

IN A NUTSHELL...

- **Social Care** – Children in need, child protection, children in care, care leavers, extra familial harm.
- **Schools and Education** – School place planning and sufficiency, home to school transport, educational attendance, educational outcomes, elective home education.
- **SEND** – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.
- **Early Help** – Family hubs, youth support.
- **Systems Leadership** – Public health, mental health support, youth justice, broader safeguarding partnership.



DEFINITION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Children's services in a local authority encompass a broad range of support and protection for vulnerable children and their families. With over 200 statutory responsibilities, national 'job descriptions' for both the **Director of Children's Services** (DCS) and the **Lead Member for Children's Services** (LMCS), and as one of the most scrutinised areas of local government, it's a big and important remit with significant accountabilities, which can present a daunting prospect. It's also a great privilege to oversee and be part of.

The Children Act 2004 requires every upper tier local authority to **appoint a DCS and designate a LMCS** to discharge the education and the children's social services functions of the local authority. In essence, they are charged, together with partners, to champion the needs and improve outcomes for all children by:

- Providing support to families to help them stay together where possible
- Protecting children from harm
- Arranging alternative care when necessary
- Ensuring access to education
- Identifying and addressing the issues impacting their social and economic wellbeing

Children will typically represent **at least 20% of the residents in an area** and children's services can and do have a positive influence and impact for local children living, learning and growing up. The child population is also often more **culturally diverse** than an area's local adult population and the services and support they are offered should seek to understand, value, and reflect this.

In short, being there for all children and understanding and meeting their needs, so they stay safe and grow up to be healthy and happy.

SCOPE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Safeguarding and Protection	A fundamental responsibility, including investigating concerns about child abuse or neglect and taking action to protect children from harm.
Supporting Children in Need	Providing extra help and support to children and families facing challenges, such as mental health issues, or disability, or living in poverty.
Promoting Wellbeing	Working to improve the physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing of children, including access to education, healthcare, and recreational opportunities.
Children in Care	Managing the care of children placed in foster or kinship care or in residential homes, or supporting them into permanence through adoption, making sure they have stable, loving homes.
Care Leavers	Supporting young people, including with housing and financial support, as they transition out of care and into independent living.
Early Help and Prevention	Offering a range of early intervention and support services to families to prevent problems from escalating and promote the wellbeing of children.
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	Supporting children with SEND and their families, ensuring they have access to appropriate education and care, including publishing and maintaining a local offer of services.
Education	Ensuring there are sufficient school places and admissions arrangements for all children and children are able to attend schools and alternative provisions which meet their needs. There are additional responsibilities where children are being Electively Home Educated (EHE).
Working with Partners	Collaboration with schools, healthcare providers, police and other agencies to deliver effective services for children and families.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND ELECTED MEMBERS

COUNCIL LEADER

- Role is elected
- Political Leadership – leads and chairs Executive if in place
- Corporate Leadership – gives political direction to Chief Executive, Directors & other officers
- Oversight of Corporate Plan and Budget
- Partnership & Community Leadership – accountable to local community
- Reporting & accountability for the council's performance
- Governance, ethical standards & relationships
- Works with other national, regional and neighbouring council leaders
- Engages in partnerships that emerge from devolution

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

- Role is appointed
- Operates in context of 'dual leadership' – may have and lead their own organisational role but also 'subordinates their own leadership to that of the lead politicians'
- Responsibility to deliver council's corporate & partnership priorities in line with vision
- Oversight & line management of DCS is required by legislation
- Provides overarching managerial framework – most senior professional – usually head of paid services – ensures 'strategic quartet' is working
- Crucial role ensuring whole council supports children enabling DCS to fulfil their role
- Leads council as one of three key partners in local safeguarding arrangements

STRATEGIC QUARTET GOOD OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

LEAD MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- Statutory role (Children Act 2004) – role is designated
- Political accountability for all LA children's services
- Accountable to local people and community – also has ward councillor role
- Member of council executive – political responsibility for the leadership, strategy & effectiveness of children's services
- Accounts for performance of Children's Services to the leader, political group & full council
- Is closely involved in strategic policy – works closely with DCS & team providing support & challenge
- Knows about performance, QA and efficiency and effectiveness of commissioning arrangements
- Visible to staff, children & their families and local community

DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- Statutory role (Children Act 2004) – role is appointed
- Professional accountability for all children's services
- First tier officer – should report directly to Chief Executive
- Role to support and deliver strategic vision for LA services, putting in place appropriate reporting, quality assurance & reporting systems
- DCS is responsible for the performance of LA functions relating to the education & social care of children, including those commissioned externally
- Accountability for management and performance of children's workforce
- Can be combined with other operational functions – Test of Assurance is required
- Works closely with key partners and stakeholders in achieving joint strategic priorities

The statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the **Director of Children's Services** (DCS) and the **Lead Member for Children's Services** (LMCS) outlines their complementary professional and political responsibilities for leading and ensuring the effectiveness of local authority children's services:

*'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.'*¹

The current version, published in 2013, remains valid, relevant and a 'must read'. The guidance references The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and emphasises the importance of making sure **children are involved in the design, development and delivery of local services**.

The DCS should report directly to the **Chief Executive**. Although it is legally possible to combine the roles with other local authority responsibilities, for example a joint DCS and Director of Adult Social Care post, or as a single DCS across more than one council, there's a clear signal about the breadth and demands of the role and a local test of assurance to ensure the explicit focus on outcomes for children isn't weakened or diluted.

The **DCS** has professional responsibility for **the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of all children's services**. The remit requires effective **partnership working** within the council and across the local area to safeguard children and improve their outcomes and wellbeing.

She or he should be **assured and able to assure others** that effective systems are in place to discharge all the LA functions related to education and social care, including where services are commissioned from another provider, for example through a Children's Trust arrangement.

The **LMCS** role also carries extensive responsibilities. Some councils decide to appoint a deputy lead member to focus on certain parts of the role, for example education. However, the lead member still retains the statutory accountability for all children's services.

The **LMCS** holds political accountability for all local authority children's services and together with the **DCS** has a **shared responsibility with all council officers and members** to:

- ✓ Act as effective and caring **corporate parents** for children in care and care leavers, always thinking and acting on 'is this good enough for my child?'
- ✓ Ensure access to high-quality provision for children with **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities** (SEND).
- ✓ Provide **alternative provision** for children outside mainstream provision, for example young people who have been permanently excluded from school.
- ✓ Make sure there is coherent planning between all agencies providing services for children involved in the **youth justice system**, so that young people in custody are safeguarded and able to access educational provision.
- ✓ Understand local needs and, with local partners, plan and secure **early intervention and prevention** services to meet these needs for children and their families.

Realising ambitions for children demands purposeful, passionate place and people leadership, and close connected communities underpinned by productive, preventative partnerships: exactly the skills and assets district council colleagues bring.

A key aspect of their complementary professional and political roles is to ensure **fair access to services for children**, specifically through arrangements which ensure:

- ✓ **Fair access to local schools**, whether these are locally maintained schools or academies.
- ✓ Provision for suitable **home to school transport**.
- ✓ Promotion of high-quality **early years provision** and a diverse supply of **well performing schools**.
- ✓ Access to sufficient educational and recreational **leisure time activities and facilities**.
- ✓ **Participation of children and young people** in public decision making so their voice and views influences local commissioning.
- ✓ Promotion of **participation in education or training** for young people.

Together with the **Leader and Chief Executive**, the DCS and LMCS, form a '**Strategic Quartet**' on behalf of children. But it's important to emphasise that championing children, safeguarding their needs and interests and improving their outcomes requires a collective commitment and action across the whole council and wider partnership.

The key task **for Chief Executives**, together with the DCS, is to help deepen the understanding of the LMCS and the Leader in relation to children's social care and children's services overall, to make sure they:

- ✓ **Promote a service culture** which isn't risk averse and supports learning in a complex and challenging environment.
- ✓ **Seek assurance** that leaders, managers and staff are:
 - Caring
 - Professionally curious
 - Committed to understanding the experiences of the children they work with.
- ✓ **Challenge** members, officers and partners to be **good Corporate Parents** to children and care experienced young adults.



INTERNAL STRUCTURE AND PORTFOLIO

→ COMMON PURPOSE

Effective cross-council working is essential for Children's Services to succeed.

However the teams within Children's Services and across the council are organised, some of the key and critical relationships and closest working are with colleagues in **Finance, Procurement, Legal, HR, IT, data and performance teams, Public Health and Democratic Services**.

Children's Services won't flourish in a silo culture.

In developing Children's Services for new unitary councils key tasks for both the Chief Executive and the Leader in relation to Children's Services, are to:

- ✓ Set and model a **culture of collective endeavour**
- ✓ Allocate **adequate resources**
- ✓ Ensure **robust IT systems**

JOINT WORKING & COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOUR:

A high priority is to foster common purpose for residents of all ages, including engendering a strong corporate and whole council approach to supporting children and young people, keeping them safe and well and making sure their voices are heard and acted on. **Children's Services won't flourish in a silo culture but need effective cross-council working to succeed.** Equally the DCS should play their part in contributing to supporting their colleagues in the delivery of council services to residents.

Children's Services, particularly children's social care, is complex and volatile. It's important that senior leaders and their teams have a nuanced understanding of the pressures and challenges experienced by children's services professionals. Colleagues working across children's services should reciprocate this by understanding their responsibility to champion children's needs and interests and invest in sustaining effective corporate working relationships and delivery of wider council

priorities. However the teams within Children's Services and across the council are organised, some of the critical relationships and closest working are with colleagues across a range of departments and teams.

LEGAL: Legal teams and Children's Services should have a **productive relationship with each other on behalf of children**, particularly around decision making about care proceedings and in relation to complex SEND cases. **Getting these difficult decisions right in the best interests of children is important. Getting them wrong costs learning and life-chances and wastes resources.**

HR SUPPORT: A settled and stable workforce is key to supporting children and families well so it's essential to have good **HR systems and processes in place** to attract, retain and develop staff and enable them to do their work well. While some staff turnover is healthy, understanding what's behind high turnover and turbulence and putting strategies in place to encourage people to stay as well as developing a strong pipeline is critical. Learning and development opportunities are important as many practitioners will have to evidence professional registration requirements. Policy reforms are likely to bring in new qualification demands, for example for SEND case workers.

PUBLIC HEALTH: Colleagues in public health are key partners in **preventative and early help work with vulnerable children and families.** Their work is vital in promoting wellbeing and

addressing health inequalities through place-based approaches which tailor interventions to local needs and build community resilience.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES: Democratic Services are important in helping ensure partnership and scrutiny arrangements provide an **independent perspective** on services and support for children by giving councillors the opportunity to offer challenge and ask searching questions to assure themselves that children's safety, care, learning and achievement and wellbeing is at the centre of decision making, service development and allocation of resources.

FINANCE: Children's Services is one of the biggest cost pressures facing councils but cannot succeed without adequate and sustainable resources. It's an area of **high risk and demand with some budget pressures that are hard to predict**. These are often centred around:

- **Cost and sufficiency of homes** for children in care.
- Need for increasingly **complex care packages for children with SEND**.
- **Unexpected demand**, for example, meeting the needs of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).
- **Staff recruitment and retention costs**, especially agency worker costs (although there is a concerted national and regional push to set price controls and reduce reliance wherever possible on interim appointments).
- **Joint partnership arrangements** with pooled budgets that may not be fairly apportioned.

An early priority is to get behind the budget allocations and model full delivery costs to inform setting a realistic and sustainable budget.

Learning from recently established councils, for example North Yorkshire, is to consider **initial ring-fencing of children's services budgets**² to provide service stability and continuity for vulnerable children and families and meet statutory requirements.

Understanding how the **Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)** works is important as councils are coming under increasing financial pressure due to demand **for SEND placements and costs associated with education, health, and care plans (EHCPs)**. Since 2020 the government has allowed councils, through a statutory override, to exclude deficits in their DSG high-needs budgets from their main revenue accounts. This means they do not have to include them on their balance sheets. It is important to remember that **home to school transport costs** fall on the council's budget, not the DSG.

In June 2025, the Government announced a package of reforms to local government funding. This includes keeping the statutory override in place until the end of 2027-28 and introducing a bespoke funding formula to recognise home to school transport costs. While likely to reduce the risk of budget pressures from children's services getting worse in the short term, this doesn't tackle the underlying causes of escalating demand and cost.

IT: Robust IT systems need to be in place early to support safe data migration of children's records from predecessor authorities and to support the collection and analysis of large amounts of data and information by professionals so they can make timely and appropriate decisions about support for children and families. It's equally important to have systems in place which help track performance and identify patterns and trends. IT and data governance processes should be robust.

Children's services core delivery typically relies on an electronic case management system (CMS). **Ensuring this system is accessible, available and reliable is critical**. Data about children must be processed accurately and handled safely, sensitively and securely as agreed data sets are expected to be available for inspectorates and the DfE, often with little notice.

To put it in context, around 1,700 children are referred to children's social care every day in England and in the last year almost a quarter of a million investigations were carried out to determine whether a child was suffering, or at risk of harm³.

Those referrals and that scale of need won't pause while systems are established so making sure these are established in shadow form and operational from day 1 is essential.

AI GOVERNANCE: The use of AI is already a developing feature in many children's services teams with its potential *'for the way it can free up time for the relational and child and family*

centred practice that really matters by using AI software to record conversations and generate assessments and in giving better and more personalised support'⁴ for children and families. However, as well as the benefits, it's important to build in **ethical governance processes to address risks.**

KEY LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

➔ POSITIVE AND PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

It takes a whole set of **positive and productive partnerships** to keep children safe, learning and well.

No single agency can operate alone in this space, so investing time in developing a collective **multi-agency vision, priorities and accountabilities for improved outcomes for children** is key.

Successful partnerships around children are driven by shared moral purpose.

It takes a whole set of **positive and productive partnerships** to keep children safe, learning and well. No single agency can operate alone, so investing time in developing a collective multi-agency vision, priorities and accountabilities for improved outcomes for children is key. Section 10 of the Children Act 2004 places a duty on both councils and named partners to co-operate to improve children's wellbeing but successful partnerships around children are driven by **shared moral purpose rather than simple mandate.**

Safeguarding is everyone's business: every council officer and member, partner and resident. 'Working Together to Safeguard Children,'¹⁵ the regularly updated statutory guidance that governs the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, emphasises the importance of strong local leadership, and highlights the multi-agency expectations for strategic leaders to:

- ✓ **Collaborate:** by developing a shared vision for how their services will work together to deliver shared goals .
- ✓ **Learn:** by using evidence from direct practice so that they know and can evaluate what is and isn't working well for local children and families.
- ✓ **Resource:** by being ambitious about helping, supporting, and protecting children in their area and jointly prioritising and sharing resources to achieve this.
- ✓ **Include:** by creating an inclusive culture where diversity is understood, and multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working is celebrated.
- ✓ **Challenge:** by being accountable to each other and their teams for the quality of the partnership working.

The chief executives of the local authority, the Integrated Care Board and police force are **statutory safeguarding partners for the local area** and are the lead safeguarding partners (LSP), responsible for ensuring their agency's effective participation in safeguarding arrangements. Each LSP must appoint a delegated safeguarding partner (DSP) to work collaboratively with partners to deliver and monitor multi-agency priorities to protect and safeguard children across the local area. In a council the DSP is likely to be the DCS. Arrangements can cover two or more local authorities, providing the safeguarding partners agree to this. Strong links with early years providers, schools and colleges are key to effective and holistic practice for children and their families.

As well as the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements there are other important partnerships and interdependencies to support children and families, for example the **Corporate Parenting Board, the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Youth Offending Management Board**.

Every officer and every councillor is a corporate parent to children in care and care leavers. The **Corporate Parenting Board** is an important forum to bring together local partners to monitor children in care's and care leavers' wellbeing, look at how life is for them through the lens of **'is this good enough for my child?'** and act together to put things right if they are not going well.

Health and Wellbeing Boards are statutory bodies providing a forum for leaders to come together and develop strategies, address health inequalities and improve health outcomes. Agendas can be big and sometimes adult dominated so it's important to make sure there's a balanced Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) that includes and identifies children's needs. Vaccination rates are falling, post-pandemic demand for children's mental health support is rising, over a fifth of five year olds are overweight or obese and one in four has tooth decay. These and other health issues for children are exacerbated by the high and rising rates of child poverty.

Youth Offending Team (YOT) management boards are multi-agency partnerships responsible for the governance and oversight of youth justice services in a local area. They are charged to ensure that local strategies and services are in place to achieve positive outcomes for children, including preventing them from becoming involved in crime or reoffending.

An important partnership is with local schools, whether these are **schools maintained by the LA or academies**, in working together to make sure local children are safe, supported and achieving well. As well as other locally agreed boards and panels, a key requirement is to establish a **Schools Forum**, bringing together governors, headteachers, early years and post-16 providers. The forum acts as both a consultative and decision making body for its members to put forward views on, for example, the allocation and distribution of DSG funding, services, and arrangements for special educational needs. Many councils also establish a wider **Education Alliance** partnership to discuss broader education issues.

An important sounding board to hear parent carer voices and views is the **local forum supporting parent carers of children with SEND**. Early engagement is vital to understand their lived experiences and involve them in helping design, develop, review and improve services and support for children with SEND. A communication void here will be quickly filled with concerns and unease.

Promoting prevention and offering an early coordinated and holistic response to tackle emerging problems swiftly before they escalate, demands partnership across a wide range of public, private and third sector organisations. **Early Help Arrangements** are voluntary, family centred, taking into account the needs and views of both children and families. Many local areas will formalise their early help arrangements through a partnership board arrangement. North Yorkshire⁶, for example, has established dedicated locality boards to facilitate collaboration between education leaders and the council, aimed at maximising outcomes and promoting inclusivity for children and young people aged from 0-25 years old.

REGULATION AND INSPECTION

→ CHILDREN'S SERVICES INSPECTION

Key Regulators – Ofsted, CQC, HMIP:

- Some inspections are of a single agency by a single inspectorate
- Other inspections are multi-agency by a multi-inspectorate
- Culture among inspectorates varies

Outcomes impact on:

- Reputation
- Community Confidence
- Recruitment and Retention
- DfE Intervention
- Financial
- LA and Partner relationships

Children's Services is the most externally scrutinised aspect of local government so it's important to understand how the **Ofsted inspection** process works. The Ofsted framework for children's social care is known as the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (**ILACS**).

It is designed to provide Ofsted with insights on the performance and direction of travel of each authority. It achieves this in a number of ways, intended to be proportionate and risk-based:

- ✓ Local authorities share an **annual self-assessment** on the quality and impact of social work practice.
- ✓ An annual **engagement 'conversation'** between the LA and regional Ofsted representatives with a focus on this self-assessment.
- ✓ **Data collection**
- ✓ **Focused inspection visits** that look at a specific service, such as the multi-agency 'front door' arrangements for referrals, or a cohort of children, for example care leavers. These reports are published.

- ✓ LAs receive **Standard** (3 weeks of inspection activity) or **Short** (2 weeks of inspection activity) inspections depending on previous inspection gradings and current direction of travel. These are graded on a **4 point scale** ranging from Inadequate, Requires Improvement, Good to Outstanding and result in a published report.
- ✓ An inadequate judgement will trigger some national intervention. This will include Ofsted making regular published **monitoring visits** followed by a reinspection using the Standard inspection process.
- ✓ If the LA has any **local children's homes**, they will be inspected at least annually by Ofsted to assess the quality of care for children, including their safety, wellbeing and support.

When a local authority delegates its statutory functions to an alternative delivery model (ADM), for example a children's trust, **the inspection is still an inspection of the local authority**, because the ADM is acting as the LA's agent. Inspectors will evaluate effectiveness using the same criteria and will also consider the LA's role in commissioning and overseeing these arrangements, and their impact on meeting needs and improving

outcomes for children. The inspection will assess whether the LA's chosen approach meets its legal duties as a corporate parent and will evaluate the impact of local area partnership arrangements, for example for children with SEND.

Some years ago, the government regionalised adoption services into **Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs)** to try to better meet the needs of children in need of adoption. However, Ofsted monitors local authorities' adoption practice through the ILACS framework to evaluate whether there is a sufficient and appropriate supply of adopters for those children needing a forever home.

Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspect education, health and care services responsible for planning, commissioning, managing, delivering and evaluating support and services for **children with SEND** in a local area, including alternative provision for children not in school. **The findings are strongly influenced by parent carer voices.** Failings may relate to health services and waiting times, but the reputational risks often fall heavily on the LA.

Learning from inspections⁷ highlights the importance of the quality relationships, especially with parent carers. Parents simply want their child to be in provision that meets their needs, and with a plan for the next steps. Too often getting that place is a long and litigious journey, leaving many parents exhausted and anxious about what will happen as their child grows up.

KEY RISKS ARE:

- Partnership and governance arrangements that lack clarity lead to inconsistent experiences for children and families.
- Inequitable funding arrangements and budget share.
- Slow and ineffective communication about strategies, actions and available services, fuelling frustration and mistrust.



→ CHILDREN'S SERVICES: SEND INSPECTION

Ofsted and CQC work together to:

- provide an independent, external evaluation of the **effectiveness of the local area partnership arrangements for children and young people with SEND.**
- where appropriate, recommend what the local area partnership should do to improve the arrangements.

All local areas will receive a full inspection at least once during a 5-year period, leading to a judgment at **one of 3 levels that arrangements:**

- ...typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes...
- ... lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes...
- ...have widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns.

Additionally, there are a number of published inspections which focus on **partnership working**:

- **Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI)** where a number of inspectorates will jointly assess the strength of the multi-agency collaboration in local areas to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, through a 'deep dive' into specific issues such as early help provision, domestic abuse, exploitation of children or mental health support.
- **HM inspectorate of Probation (HMIP)** will regularly **inspect youth offending teams** to judge the effectiveness and quality of services provided by the LA and partners to children and young people in the youth justice system.
- It's also important not to forget that in any one term-time week there is likely to be a local **school inspection** happening. While the DCS and LMCS won't be directly involved, nevertheless they are charged to be ambitious in tackling underperformance in schools, whether by considering alternative structural solutions, for example academisation, or through challenging academy sponsors and principals if the school is already an academy.

A poor Ofsted rating in any aspect of services and support has profound impacts for vulnerable children and their families, serious resourcing implications and will cause significant reputational damage both locally and nationally.

What's really important is not to wait and rely on Ofsted to make a judgement, but to ensure **effective monitoring systems and oversight are in place to provide a robust self-assessment of performance and direction of travel with evidenced and resourced plans to sustain or improve practice.**

This includes **robust assurance and audit arrangements** across the service and key partnerships and **strong political leadership, including effective scrutiny.**

In terms of Ofsted, new unitary councils don't start with the Ofsted gradings or judgements of their predecessor councils. But they will inevitably 'inherit' (positively or potentially less so) some of the systems, people and approaches that have been in place until now. **Ofsted won't pause inspections during LGR processes.** So, it is important to understand possible strengths to build on and any failings that will need focused attention, for example in relation to partnership working on SEND or findings from recent ILACS or JTAI inspections.



RISKS AND ASSURANCE

→ WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW AND HOW TO KNOW IT

- **'No short cuts to understanding local performance - just relentless monitoring and oversight through a well-defined and supported line of accountability.'**
- Accurate picture of **current performance, strengths, weaknesses and risks** from issues on the horizon.
- **Cost of getting it wrong** - often result of inquests, criminal trials, Ofsted/CQC inspections and media coverage.
- Danger of **false positives and negatives** from taking snapshots.
- Do you know what your **early warning signs** would be?

There are a number of long standing '**signatures of risk**'⁸ related to children's services:

- **Turnover and change in senior leadership**
- **Service reorganisations combined with challenging budget reductions**
- **Lack of political focus on safeguarding and care**
- **Assuming performance standards are secure in an environment of service maintenance rather than development**
- **Limited self-awareness and no external challenge**
- **Inconsistent observation of practice**
- **Professional weakness in supervision and audit**
- **Lack of an organisational learning culture**
- **Weak commitment from partners**
- **Lack of focus on the child's journey or voice of the child**
- **Poor workforce development and/or capacity**
- **Failing to listen to or accept frontline feedback**
- **Not developing a culture of anticipation and early warning of issues**

More recent additions⁹ to the list are:

- **Financial difficulties, including auditor concerns**
- **Inadequate sharing of concerns in relation to potential extremism**
- **Over-reliance on agency staff**
- **Lack of grip on using qualitative and quantitative data to drive quality assurance.**

Any one of these may be an indicator of areas to focus on, but the presence of a significant number is definitely a **clear warning sign**.

Ofsted will look closely at how effectively services for children are established in new councils. Inspectors will expect chief executives to be able to offer a convincing and evidenced assurance summary in response to questioning in three broad areas:

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

The important thing is not to wait for the inspection call. Assurance won't come from rehearsing for an Ofsted interview. What will help is investing time in knowing the key features of effective Children's Services and, in relation to your local system, practice and partnerships, understanding what needs to improve or be sustained, and seeking assurance this is happening and making a difference for children.

Your DCS is key to leading this process, instead it's always important not to rely on a single source of evidence but to triangulate and amplify the assurances you are receiving, by using a range of ways to stay connected with practitioners and partners as well as listening to the voice and views of children and families.

What matters is to build in time to regularly:

- ✓ **Listen to the voices of children and families:** Use opportunities such as your children in care council, or forums for care experienced young people to come together, youth parliaments, opportunities to meet with young carers or visits to schools. What are children saying? Are you assured that their views, wishes and feelings are being heard, promoted and acted on?
- ✓ **Collaborative case file audit** with practitioners: can you 'see and hear' the child in the records? Is their voice shaping plans and support for them?
- ✓ **Review workforce data:** Stable, settled teams are essential to embedding effective, consistent good practice for children and families. Ask about experience, qualifications and length of tenure, vacancy rates, proportions of agency staff, turnover rates and trends. Find out about the ratio of newly qualified social workers, and the support they are receiving, as well as the proportions of experienced practitioners and managers.

High rates of churn and change are a warning sign that all may not be right.

- ✓ **Working culture and practice:** Make time to visit, over time, all the services (and don't go just once). Ask about how the model of practice adopted is working. Can they describe it to you? Is there a sense of ownership about it? Are partners supportive of and using the approach? Are you picking up any inconsistencies?
- ✓ Talk to your DCS about **workloads and how caseloads are allocated:** Some cases will be more complex than others so it's not just about numbers. Newly qualified workers are entitled to a reduced caseload, so they are able to learn and develop their skills. Ask about unallocated cases, re-referrals and long running child protection plans. **Drift and delay for children is always a key risk.**
- ✓ Use the channels you have to get feedback about how **visible, approachable and connected leaders are:** *'Do middle and senior managers give sufficient time and attention to understand the current experience of front-line staff?'*¹⁰
- ✓ Make sure that **politicians are championing children across the council and with partners.** Are they challenging officers and partners to be the best possible corporate parents for children in care and care leavers? Are cross-council relationships working well? Are all partners supported and engaged in the children agenda?
- ✓ Review the **metrics that matter** on behalf of children. Is the data collected useful and being used within and between teams and across partnerships? Are you and the LMCS regularly receiving quality assurance findings from the DCS and senior leaders on the impact of service and partnership arrangements?

Whatever footprint the new council covers, it's important that children have a sense of connectivity with their local community, feel safe, healthy, and ambitious about their future, with a supporting workforce confident that they are making a difference.

- ✓ Ask 'How effective and well set is your children's information system upon which much of the data relies?'
The **case recording system** you use will impact on data collection, collation, and the analysis of performance trends.
- ✓ **Benchmark** your local area with others, regionally, nationally and with statistical neighbours, to better understand performance patterns and trends.
- ✓ Do you know how many **children are missing from home, from care or from education**. What are the actions in place with partners to follow up on each child?
- ✓ Ask whether **Black[™] children are over-represented in the local youth justice system?** If so, what actions are in hand to understand and address these disparities? The same question applies to **children excluded from school, children in care and children with special educational needs and disabilities**.
- ✓ Consider what the **concerns, complaints and compliments** received are telling you about the quality and effectiveness of services.
- ✓ Check that **financial planning** recognises the full cost and complexity of children's services and prioritises sustainable investment in early impactful interventions. Are partners contributing equitably to arrangements?

- ✓ Review how well **scrutiny arrangements** are operating for children. What about other partnership boards?
- ✓ Look at the **service self-assessment** – is it up to date? Do you recognise the picture being painted from your assurance routine? Does your LMCS know and recognise it?
- ✓ Review how effective and cost effective **commissioned services** are. What about any **shared service** arrangements? How is the quality of service and impact on outcomes for children monitored? Will continuing these arrangements support the shift towards earlier intervention and better prevention?

Assurance is about asking questions and knowing what to do with the answers. Make sure that the assurances you gain, together with the risks and challenges you're aware of, are reflected in your local partnership ambitions, priorities and plans for children.

And you don't have to feel that the assurance load all falls on you alone. There is support from:

- **Independent chairs or scrutineers:**
Your local safeguarding board may have an independent chair or scrutineer. If so, she or he can offer you a useful independent perspective on the effectiveness of partner commitment to multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

- **Partners:** Check in regularly with key partners and undertake joint multi-agency audits with them.
- **External reviews:** As well as inspections consider whether an external review from time to time, such as those led by LGA, will offer useful insights.
- **Regional arrangements:** Every region in England collates data from all the councils quarterly and provides useful benchmarking information. Don't forget to look at statistical neighbour data too. Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances (RIAs) are sector-led collaborations to support and promote improvements in children's services. Ask them what the view is regionally about how your Children's Services are led and operated.

When there are signs of problems, just highlighting them isn't enough. You have to be assured that steps are in hand to resolve the issues or situation.

THE KEY IS TO:

- ✓ **Clarify the extent** of what's not working if possible – focus and action rather than hurried responses are important.
- ✓ **Act early** – don't let issues drift, performance problems won't resolve themselves.
- ✓ **Seek assurance and evidence** about what's being put in place to address the problems.
- ✓ **Use your regional alliance** to help. They can provide support to your DCS.
- ✓ **Consider where you might seek support:** RIA leads or your LGA adviser are possibilities, or draw on children's services expertise in your peer network.

The world of tomorrow simply cannot prosper if today's children aren't healthy, educated and protected.

ISSUES FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES: CURRENT POLICY SHIFTS AND PRESSURES

→ CHILDREN NOW

'The current generation of babies, children and young people has faced a lifetime of economic, social and political challenges, perhaps unmatched in the post-war era. The financial crisis, a stagnant economy, significant reductions in public spending, Brexit, a pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of climate change have radically changed the shape of children and young people's lives in the UK.'

'A long road to recovery: Local Authority spending on early intervention children's services 200/11 to 2023/4', Pro Bono

CONTEXT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The **pandemic** had a significant effect on children, severely limiting social development and interaction, impacting their learning and achievement and affecting their (and their parents') health and wellbeing. Covid is still casting a long shadow with children, especially teenagers, resulting in **declining levels of mental health and happiness**, a significant **drop in school attendance rates** and a national concern about **school readiness, particularly for very young children**.

This is a generation that has grown up **online** and never known any alternative to **social media, smartphones, instant communication and the growth of AI**. *'While there are positives to the online world, allowing children to learn, play and explore it comes hand in hand with very real risks and harms when children are left unprotected online.'*¹²

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) was described as an 'epidemic' by national policing leads last year, fuelled by a sharp rise in online and tech-enabled abuse.

Child poverty is a complex issue of interconnected economic, social and

Covid is still casting a long shadow for children, especially teenagers.

environmental factors, with an estimated 4.5m children living in relative poverty. This profoundly impacts their childhoods and their life-chances.¹³

FINANCIAL PRESSURES IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Councils will also need to plan and design the future of children's services against a backdrop of tough **financial pressures** for local government.

A 2025 report by Pro Bono Economics found that:

- Council spending on **early intervention services** has fallen by more than £2bn since 2010/11, an overall drop of 42%.
- **Reductions have been highly uneven** in their distribution with the most deprived areas faring the worst.
- More recently spending has begun to rise, albeit modestly, with most focused on **family support**.



- Spending on **children's centres and services for young people** has declined significantly, with voluntary sector providers badly affected.
- **Significant demand and cost pressures** are associated with:
 - Funding for children needing **residential care** rising to an all-time high of £3bn.
 - Despite a slight fall in 2024, the number of **children in care** remains almost 40% higher (more than 83,000) than it was 20 years ago.
 - **Support for children with SEND**, with the number of children with an education, health and care plan increasing by 140% between 2015 and 2024. This has resulted in many councils experiencing a significant SEND budget deficit.
 - Council expenditure on **temporary accommodation**, with more than 160,000 children living in temporary accommodation in 2024, more than double the number in 2011.

POLICY PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Against this strategic and financial context there are a number of overarching national policy priorities that directly impact on children. It is important to build these into LGR planning from the start.

POLICY PRIORITIES:

- ✓ **Bring down levels of child poverty**
- ✓ **Invest in multi-agency preventative work**
- ✓ **Grip Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) by grooming gangs**
- ✓ **Keep children and families together wherever safe and possible**
- ✓ **Reduce the need for children to enter the care system**
- ✓ **Reform SEND through a more inclusive mainstream school culture**

Building in and investing in local prevention, community resilience and social regeneration early in LGR planning will support effective outcomes for children and families as well as align with the NHS 10 Year Plan and the likely direction of travel to emerge from the Casey review of adult social care.

These will require sustained local commitment and collaboration. At the same time councils will be working to deliver on wider strategic aims that intersect with the ambition to improve outcomes for children and families:

- ✓ **Tackle the housing crisis**
- ✓ **Address regional inequalities**
- ✓ **Improve the nation's health**

In 2022 a comprehensive review of social care across England¹⁴ took place to identify a whole-system approach to better support children and families, emphasised a need for **increased focus on family support and a more responsive, respectful, and effective system.**

Much of this thinking underpins **The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill** (currently going through Parliament) which aims to improve the safeguarding and welfare of children, particularly those in social care or leaving care, while also raising educational standards and ensuring all children receive a quality education. It focuses on strengthening child protection, ensuring children's needs are met in education and care, and supporting families. The **Resources** section of this handbook provides an overview of key aspects of the Bill.

The focus of the Bill is on enabling **better partnership, early help and multi-agency prevention to:**

- reduce numbers of children entering the care system.
- tackle SEND challenges through more emphasis on inclusive mainstream education.
- improve school standards.

The Government intends the Bill and its policy agenda for children and families to align with NHS reforms and the shift from 'hospital to community'. It plans to achieve this through the national roll-out of **'Best Start Family Hubs'**¹⁵. These are designed to offer parents support through a one-stop shop across health, education and wellbeing. They will also act as a 'front door' to local family help workers for vulnerable families.

The Government has recently enshrined its policy priorities for children and families in its draft **Local Government Outcomes Framework**¹⁶. This includes three priority outcomes (each accompanied by metrics) that are at the heart of how local authorities and their partners think about and plan for Children's Services:

- **Best start in life:** by improving early child health, family support and early education.
- **Every child achieving and thriving:** by supporting all children to achieve and thrive in school, at home and in their communities.
- **Keeping children safe and family security:** by helping more families to thrive together.

Already published, **'The Families First Programme Guide'**¹⁷ sets out how local authority Children's Services should begin to implement:

- **Seamless family help**, including the family help lead practitioner role and multi-disciplinary family help teams.
- **Multi-agency child protection teams** (MACPTs) with a strengthened role for education providers.
- **Engagement with family networks** including family group decision making.

Over time, the investment in preventative services designed to keep families together is expected to see a significant **reduction in the numbers of children in care** and associated **savings from current placement costs** contributing to rebalancing the system overall towards **earlier intervention**.

The recent Casey Report on **CSE by grooming gangs**¹⁸ highlights the significant and extensive under-reporting of '*multiple sexual assaults committed against children by multiple men on multiple occasions*' and those children then experiencing the '*shame of not being believed*' and agencies there to protect them in collective denial that this was happening locally and regularly. The audit highlights that, while relatively rare, this is a significantly under-reported crime. Local leaders will want to ensure that it is a priority to honestly and openly always '**see children as children**', recognise **CSE can happen in any place**, and collectively commit to **sharing and acting on information** in children's best interests.

Key drivers of **child poverty** include insufficient income from employment or social security, the high cost of living (especially housing, childcare, and essential goods), and lack of access to quality education and healthcare. Inequality, discrimination, and conflict can also significantly contribute to child poverty. Children living in families where someone is disabled, children with a lone parent and global majority¹⁹ children are more likely to grow up in poverty.

Councils can't solve this issue alone, but homelessness and housing insecurity are key contributors. What will help is to link **addressing child poverty into local housing plans**, and an effective local and regional economic plan to drive growth and employment opportunities.

High **childcare costs** are currently a barrier to employment for many families. Councils have a duty to secure sufficient early childhood services for families and currently this is a complex area needing significant reform which the LGA set out well in its 2023 report on early education and childcare.²⁰

In your LGR planning, an important starting point is to find out about:

- Current childcare provision and costs and where the gaps are.
- Options to promote support wraparound childcare, before and after school.
- Opportunities to build in joined up and streamlined information and support for parents into locality hubs.

WHY THESE POLICY SHIFTS MATTER:

- ✓ A shift towards **locality based early help and prevention** for families can significantly improve children's long-term safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes and lead to cost savings in the long run.
- ✓ **Keeping children and families together** wherever possible, supports children's wellbeing and development, helps to foster a sense of belonging and strong family relationships and helps children maintain their cultural heritage and personal history.
- ✓ **Homelessness and insecure housing** has a profound and detrimental impact on children. Frequent moves and poor living conditions are isolating, affect children's physical and mental health and disrupt their education.
- ✓ **Treating children as children** and not 'adultifying' them is vital to effective safeguarding and support.
- ✓ **Childcare costs** are a significant barrier to parental employment so working with partners to maximise affordable local provision is a priority.



BE AWARE:

- **Investment in prevention** has fallen significantly over the last 15 years so is likely to need significant reprioritisation by the council and partners.
- **Multi-agency locality teams** are likely to be the best delivery mechanisms for family support. It is crucial to consider existing locality structures early in the planning stage and how partners' geographical footprint fit with these, then decide collectively how these can be developed and joined up with other services and support.

LGR OFFERS A TIMELY OPPORTUNITY TO:

Plan, build and invest in **local prevention, community resilience and social regeneration from the beginning to support effective outcomes for children and families**, as well as align with the NHS 10 year Plan and the likely direction of travel to emerge from the Casey review of adult social care, by:

- Building in **locality multi-agency preventative work** from the start.
- Establishing local partnership services in ways that **make sense to families and offer them seamless and streamlined support**.
- **Maximising multi-agency working** by alignment with partner plans and footprint.
- Keeping the **voices and views of children and families central to service design**.

CURRENT POLICY SHIFTS AND INITIATIVES

Key national strategies which will impact Children's Services in the very near future include:

- **The Best Start In Life Strategy**²¹, published in July 2025, includes the ambition to create Best Start Family Hubs in every local authority area and brings together various other national initiatives to improve services for children and families. These include increases to government-funded childcare, creating more early education and childcare places and setting a school readiness target.
- Transformation of the **SEND system**, currently one of the biggest worries for both local authorities as well as for children, families and school leaders who bear the brunt of an increasingly litigious system.

Recent **Fairer Funding** announcements include retaining the DSG statutory override²² until the end of 2027–2028 and the introduction of a bespoke formula to recognise home to school transport costs.

*'Any reform programme can't just be about SEND, it must deliver an **inclusive education system**, with education in mainstream provision as the presumption (as originally envisaged in the 2014 Act), and a graduated response to those children who need additional support.'*²³

- The **Casey review of Adult Social Care**, due to provide an initial report in 2026, and a final report by 2028. Findings will be particularly relevant for young people with complex needs as they transition into adult services.

- A **Curriculum and Assessment Review**, due to report in Autumn 2025, with a focus on how curriculum and assessment can be more inclusive and equitable and making sure that the subject offer is relevant to future economic, social and environmental needs.
- Alignment of **Inspections of Schools and Social Care** reforms.
- Initial funding opportunities to give **young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods** opportunities²⁴ to take part in music, sport and drama to build skills for the future and to strengthen voluntary organisations supporting youth outcomes have been announced. Figures are small in relation to the size of historic cuts to young people's services but do offer real opportunities in an important aspect of Children's Services.
- **Health reforms** designed to rebalance spending towards preventative and community services to address the challenges of an ageing population, escalating demand for acute services and lengthy waiting lists, particularly for mental health support. Children haven't historically had a high profile in NHS planning, but this could be a very real opportunity to better meet their needs.
- The Government views the Best Start In Life Strategy as being intertwined with the move to a **Neighbourhood Health Service** set out in the 10 Year Health Plan and integral to the Child Poverty Strategy, due to be published later in 2025.

Despite the workforce challenges and resource pressures, LGR presents a great opportunity to do things better for local children and families through plans and strategies that cement in local prevention, community resilience and social regeneration.

WHY THESE MATTER:

- ✓ **SEND demand and costs** have risen significantly. Funding has stagnated and is not matching demand. Local schools and specialist provision are under pressure and not always able to meet need resulting in children often having to travel long distances. Families find the current system litigious and lengthy and worry about the impact on their child. Many councils are carrying a significant SEND budget deficit. Building SEND arrangements and supporting inclusion in mainstream schools into planning considerations is key.
 - ✓ **Children transition to adult services** between the ages of 16 to 18. Transition isn't a single event, but a gradual process of support for a young person and their family, usually starting around age 14. For children and their families, unless done really well, the move from familiar children's services to new adult services and the expectation that young people will take on decision making for themselves (so long as they have capacity to do so) can be a very worrying time. The increased demand from children's services moves into equally hard pressed adult services. Major council risks and financial pressures centre around services led by the DCS and the Director of Adult Social Care (DASS). So, it's important to plan for children and adult services in concert.
 - ✓ The **national curriculum** was last reviewed more than a decade ago. The current arrangements don't work well for all children, particularly those with SEND. They weren't designed to take account of social, economic and technological change: the rise of AI, need for better critical thinking and digital skills, and scientific and cultural knowledge needed to tackle global environmental challenges. Employers report a lack of employability and work readiness.
- The current assessment system relies heavily on high volume, high stakes KS4 exams and results in premature post 16 specialisation.
- ✓ **Inspections** are currently high stakes, particularly for councils, in terms of the time and resources required to prepare for and respond to them. They can and do drive improvement and ensure accountability but present a heavy burden. This is unique to children's services and not matched elsewhere in the council and needs strong and sustained corporate support.
 - ✓ **Having things to do and places to go is important for young people.** Investment in youth services has been decimated over the years so early thinking about leveraging in opportunities to grow youth work provision as part of investment in prevention is crucial.
 - ✓ **'Childhood is precious because it is brief; too many children are spending too much of it waiting for care'**.²⁵ Health reforms coupled with LGR are a vital opportunity to join up services and support around children and families to create healthier children and in turn healthier adults. Make sure early conversations with health partners about prevention include children front and centre, and planning takes account of health geographical boundaries.
 - ✓ **Poverty harms children's present and their future.** Homelessness and housing insecurity are key factors in child poverty as is employment and employability. Building in a commitment to reducing child poverty as part of tackling the housing crisis will make a positive contribution as will raising awareness across housing teams and linking their services into locality early help hubs.

BE AWARE:

- Behind all of these, however, lies a significant **workforce challenge** with recruitment and retention challenges affecting social workers, teachers, youth workers, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists as well as substantial **resource pressures**.
- There is much more to do on behalf of groups of children who are facing discrimination, disadvantage and systemic barriers where services and practitioners fail to consistently consider, understand and take account of **children's identity and heritage**.

LGR OFFERS A TIMELY OPPORTUNITY TO:

Capitalise on national policy aims and initiatives by putting in place arrangements to:

- Engage with **parents and carers of children with SEND** to build a really inclusive local offer that gives them confidence in their child's education and, over time, brings down costs.
- **Work with schools** to support them in developing **local SEND arrangements and to become more inclusive**. This might include repurposing existing buildings as a response to falling rolls or establishing new accommodation to better meet need.
- Use the forthcoming Curriculum and Assessment review to **cement schools into economic and regeneration planning by engaging with them about local skills gaps, work experience and supported internship opportunities**.
- Make sure the new **DCS and DASS work together successfully**, for example in relation to domestic abuse, mental health and drug and alcohol issues for adults with an emphasis where possible on reducing demand.

- Leverage in opportunities to **grow youth work provision** as part of investment in prevention by building on existing district council expertise in sports and leisure and environmental opportunities and links with the local voluntary sector to help achieve this.
- Engage in **early conversations and planning with health colleagues** about how 'Best Start' Family Hubs and Neighbourhood Health Services will align with locality multi-agency preventative plans. Develop a shared commitment to helping children grow up to be healthier adults by tackling childhood obesity, vaccine hesitancy, and effective local mental health support as well as any other local priorities highlighted through the JSNA.

A shift towards locality based early help and prevention for families can significantly improve children's long-term safety, wellbeing and educational outcomes and lead to cost savings in the long run.

INSIGHTS INTO EFFECTIVE CHILDREN'S SERVICES

→ HALLMARKS OF EFFECTIVE CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Effective Children's Services prioritise the **child's welfare**, employ a **skilled and settled workforce**, and **foster a culture of learning and improvement**.

Key elements are **effective leadership**, strong **management oversight**, and commitment to **engaging children and families** collaboratively and responsively.

Ofsted will come regularly and make public judgements about all aspects of children's services and its improvement gradient and prospects. Rather than wait to be told, the focus should be on knowing and understanding what the key features of effective children's services are, and where you are in relation to these.

The ADCS President in her inaugural speech²⁶ summed up the hallmarks of effective Children's Services succinctly, simply and powerfully:

Children aren't going to care about size or form. What matters to them is how they feel about where they live.

- ✓ **Clarity of purpose and ability to prioritise** because there are many competing demands, and you can't do everything all at once.
- ✓ **Stability and continuity in the workforce** so that you have capacity to tackle priorities and reliably embed new practice.
- ✓ **Values-led leadership so success is sustainable**, and your best people are committed to the cause.
- ✓ **Community understanding, support and belonging** around a collective endeavour.
- ✓ **There is no escaping from actually doing the hard work and keeping an eye on continuous improvement.** All the fancy strategies, communications, measures and reporting cycles are no substitute for actually fixing what needs fixing.
- ✓ And finally, this all takes time, and **a level of 'protection' or shelter is required to give the time and space needed to deliver the improvement.**



ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

→ CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

'Councils that will thrive ... will be the ones that know their place, that understand their unique character and needs, and recognise their role not just as service providers, but as builders of civic life.'

'It takes a village to raise a place: People, Place and Digital Imagination in 2025' (ADCS, 08/25)

'Leaders' reflected that local areas in which place matters seem to do better, and that a clear understanding of places and localities should be the starting point of any structure.'

'Form and function: exploring structural change in children's services' (LGA, 2022)

Any large-scale structural change impacting Children's Services needs to keep front and centre the **key building blocks that underpin establishing and sustaining high-quality services for children and families.**

In 2023, The Isos partnership published research on Children's Services improvement, commissioned by the LGA,²⁷ which offered a useful model of seven enablers and three cross-cutting themes:



From 'A maturing approach to children's Services Improvement: updating the key enablers of progress' Isos/LGA 2023

The original Isos research took place in 2016. Nearly a decade on, Isos highlighted a changed context and increased pressures for children's services in relation to:

- **Policy:** placing more emphasis on engagement with children and families, the role of family networks in keeping children safe, and the importance of an effective early help offer.
- **Inspection burden:** a more positive inspection experience than previously, but even with partnership focused inspections, the onus of addressing development areas falls disproportionately on the DCS and LA.
- **Changing profile of children's needs,** exacerbated by Covid, resulting in:
 - deepening mental health needs.
 - escalating needs of children who missed out on wider socialisation or opportunities to access early help.
 - an emerging trend of young people at risk of harm from their peers or societal influences.
 - rising numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.
- **Placements:** a shortage of suitable placements to meet the needs of children with complex needs coupled with residential providers becoming more risk averse about the children and young people they accept.
- **Workforce:** recruitment and retention challenges impacting social workers and the wider children's workforce, for example, residential care home managers, educational psychologists, school nurses, speech and language therapists, health visitors, early years practitioners and family support workers. Hybrid working has offered flexibility but also presented challenges to interpersonal multi-agency working.
- **Budget pressures:** the biggest expenditure rise is on children in care while spend on preventative services and targeted provision for young people has at best flatlined.

The updated research also identified the prominence of three cross cutting themes, highlighting the importance of:

- **Listening and responding to children's voices and views:** engaging with the lived and living experience of children and their families is key to effective Children's Services.
- **Partnership working:** a 'bedrock for improvement' but one of the hardest aspects to get consistently right, especially in an environment of '*funding pressures, workforce vacancies and ever-more complex demands*'.
- **Culture change:** change and improvement won't happen without an honest appraisal of organisational and partnership culture, and using that to address shortcomings and move on.

Seize the LGR opportunity to build in and embed these cross-cutting themes into the heart of children's services in the new council:

- ✓ **Listening and responding to children's voices and views**
- ✓ **Partnership working**
- ✓ **Culture change**

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

The DCS is pivotal to growing the capacity and confidence across the partnership to improve outcomes for children. At present the DCS role remains one of the hardest chief officer roles to fill and retain, with tenures of DCSs averaging about three years. During 2024/5 over a quarter of councils experienced a change in DCS post holder.²⁸ **This leadership churn has a direct impact on ability to make and sustain improvements in children's services.**

The Staff College '*Leading for Longer*'²⁹ looked at the factors behind the high turnover of leadership roles in Children's Services and offers important insights into what helps build effective and sustainable services for children and families.



As Jane Parfremment, Chief Executive of The Staff College, highlights from the findings:

'The ability to recruit and retain a high-quality DCS who brings stability and effective leadership is one of the single biggest determinants in whether a Local Authority's children's service thrives...

The most significant single factor that impacts on firstly whether someone would choose a particular local authority and then whether they can stay and succeed is not the external issues but internal ones. This is good news because it is something that those within the local authority can control.

The message from this report to Chief Executives and elected political leaders is clear – if you want to recruit, retain and enable a DCS to succeed they need your support and they need to feel they are working within a council where the culture is a healthy enabling and open one and where diversity of leadership is welcomed and celebrated. This is within your gift.'

PLACE-BASED LEADERSHIP AND CONVENING POWER

In the context of LGR, it's worth adding two new cross-cutting themes, both of which are **critical to effective children's services and are key strengths of district councils:**

- **Place-based Leadership**
- **Convening Power**

In 2022 the LGA³⁰ looked at a number of councils that had undertaken large scale structural change of children's services to capture their learning and insight. Leaders:

'Reflected that local areas in which 'place matters' seem to do better, and that a clear understanding of places and localities should be the starting point of any structure.'

More recently Ana Popovici, Executive Director of Children's Services, Wandsworth Council and Deputy Chief Executive, Richmond & Wandsworth Councils, highlighted the **importance of place-based leadership for children:**

*'In children's services, you learn quickly that a sense of place is often a child's first sense of safety. The walk to school, the trusted face at the gate, the park bench where friendships start or hearts break, these are all part of the soft infrastructure that shapes us.'*³¹

PLACE-BASED STRENGTHS CENTRE AROUND:

- ✓ Established levels of **trust with community** representatives.
- ✓ Granular understanding of **neighbourhood needs and priorities**.
- ✓ Confidence and capacity in **collaboration**.
- ✓ Knowing how to grow, shape and steward the kind of places where **people of all ages feel they belong and can thrive**.

Convening power adds relational value to locality working by fostering a sense of collective responsibility and joining up services around the unique needs of local communities.

CONVENING POWER ADDS VALUE BY:

- ✓ Promoting and supporting close **connectivity with communities**.
- ✓ Joining up trusted and **co-ordinated services around people's needs**.
- ✓ Addressing the social and economic factors that **influence health and wellbeing**, through housing, leisure and wellbeing services.
- ✓ Galvanising local partners in making **best use of collective resources** to generate and achieve **momentum for change**.

Why place-based leadership skills and convening power matter for children and families:

Taken together, place-based leadership skills and strong convening capital are a powerful combination in planning and implementing LGR for children and families, and key assets that district councils bring.

In the shift towards **prevention and early intervention and co-production with children and families**, these attributes enable leaders to build on their deep **local knowledge** and:

- ✓ **Champion children** and be **ambitious for them**.
- ✓ Understand their **unique needs and join up services around them** so families receive holistic support rather than fragmented assistance.
- ✓ **Mobilise and join up resources**, including funding, expertise, partners and community assets to support children and families.
- ✓ **Break the cycle of poverty** by addressing contributory systemic factors, such as unemployment, lack of access to timely help and inadequate housing.
- ✓ **Develop ward profiles** which map needs, provision and available services and support and use these and other **partnership data** to inform and update the joint **strategic needs assessment** and **build up locality based service provision**.
- ✓ Commit whole-heartedly to **parents and carers playing an integral part in strategic decision making and shaping**, for example as trusted partners in developing, implementing and evaluating **SEND services and systems**.
- ✓ Create **sustainable change** by focusing on community led solutions and long-term strategies.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CO-CREATION WITH FAMILIES

A hallmark of **effective place-based partnerships** is the concept of subsidiarity, which prioritises **local solutions and decision-making and promotes individual and community empowerment** by enabling people to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

As well as an honest critique of the enablers that are or aren't in place, it is also critical to plan the **'how'** of the implementation approach. Community engagement and co-creation are vital approaches to establishing accessible and responsive services for children and families. Involving them in service design and delivery will foster trust, build capacity and promote sustainable, positive outcomes for children. District and other smaller councils are likely to have a natural advantage and bring a track record of skills and expertise to this work.

Myrons Maxims³² are a set of principles emphasising ownership, process, and interconnectedness, which offer a **practical framework for leading change and transformation**:

- **People own what they help create:** plan from inception ways to engage children and families, politicians, partners, practitioners and stakeholders to co-create a preferred future. Strategic change and transformational planning is vital, but it has to be underpinned with engagement, ownership and commitment to a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and changing their lives and life-chances for the better.

- **Real change takes place in real work:** make sure the multi-agency workforce is supported and resourced to share ideas, experience and grow inclusive and fair practice for children and families.
- **The people who do the work do the change:** prioritise regular communication to all stakeholders during and after transitional planning.
- **Connect the system to more of itself:** a key leadership task is to foster and promote common purpose, cross-council and multi-agency partnerships into a shared narrative about and momentum to collectively improve outcomes for local children.
- **The process you use to get to the future is the future you get:** planning for sustainable and effective children's services is emotionally intense, challenging and tough work. But it doesn't and shouldn't stay in a silo. Internal and wider local partnership at its best, is about 'getting to us': working together collegially and inclusively and never leaving out the children and communities you are there to support and serve.

Seize the opportunity to transform children's lives and life-chances: they are our now and our future.

SIZE AND SCALE

→ **THINK BIG FOR CHILDREN.
ACT LOCAL. BUILD IN A REGIONAL
PERSPECTIVE.**

The narrative about merging district and county councils to form unitary councils often focuses on the question of **size and scale**. It's an equation that needs to be balanced. On the one hand the argument is that bigger footprints achieve economies of scale but at the cost of distance from the communities they serve; on the other that smaller footprints offer democratic connectivity between the council and its communities and facilitate listening and acting on local voices and views.

Both larger and smaller councils can deliver effective Children's Services. However, larger councils need to confront the question of how they can relate to the towns and communities they represent, really understand the local current and future economic and skills gaps, and secure alliances with key partners on behalf of children.

District and smaller councils understand local need and priorities in granular detail, are trusted by and connected to their communities and close to key partners: police, health, education, and the voluntary sector, but have to reflect on where scale can help achieve better leverage and cost advantage.

Children's Services is a **low-volume but highly complex service**. In comparison with the volume of people needing support from Adult Social Care, the number of local children needing support at any one time is likely to be far fewer. However, the **'unit cost and the resource intensity of supporting them is likely to be significantly higher.'**³³ This tends to result in greater volatility in financial predictions and significant management overheads to cover the range of specialist support services needed. In smaller councils **there's no hiding place for less than good services**, but good or better is an absolute entitlement for vulnerable children and families.

The arguments are finely balanced but **what does work in smaller unitaries is to think big for children, act local and build in a regional perspective from the beginning**. This will provide the **benefits of scale, align with mayoral devolution but not detract from the real advantages of close, connected neighbourhood working where children and families feel they belong and can thrive**.

People shape places and places in turn shape people. LGR offers a once in a life-time opportunity to use place-based leadership skills and convening power to shape local children's lives and life-chances for the better.

PLACE MATTERS	SCALE CAN HELP
✓ Closer to communities	✓ Resilience and capacity
✓ Agile in appreciating and responding to local context	✓ Commissioning at volume
✓ Better able to take more joined-up decisions on cross cutting issues across building, planning, housing, transport, inclusion and children and families	✓ Key partnerships, e.g. Health and Police, often cover a large geographical footprint
✓ Supports locality prevention arrangements and relational practice	✓ Workforce and overhead costs
✓ Facilitates partnership working for children and families and a culture of championing children	✓ Access to specialist services for children with low incidence but high cost needs

Children aren't going to care about size or form. What matters to them is how they feel about where they live. Whatever footprint the new council covers, **what matters is for children to have a sense of connectivity with their local community, to feel safe, healthy, and ambitious about their future, supported by a workforce that knows them well and is confident about how to make a difference.**

There's a narrative that big is beautiful and brings economies of scale. But what matters is **proximity to people and the places they live in**, staying close to families and supporting them through strong, passionate leadership that can truly give children the best possible start in life and provide good support and services to them and their families.

Size matters but it isn't decisive and there isn't a magic number for effective children's services. The most important focus is about appreciating and responding to the local context, understanding the needs and demands as well as *'the capacity, scale and geography – and the nature of the improvement challenge'* and seizing the opportunity to be **better together for children living, learning and growing up in a place that is their home.**

DISTRICT COUNCIL ASSETS AND LEVERS

→ **DISTRICT COUNCILS ARE WELL PLACED TO GROW, SHAPE AND STEWARD PLACES WHERE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FEEL THEY BELONG AND WHERE THEY CAN THRIVE.**

District councils deliver a range of services – statutory and non-statutory – that have a direct influence on outcomes for children and families and are already an important part of the children's services ecosystem. These include: housing and homelessness, leisure and wellbeing, financial inclusion and welfare support, community outreach, neighbourhood planning and environmental health.

This means that districts bring significant strengths to planning and implementing effective services for children and families through their focus on prevention and established track record in:

- ✓ **Building local trust, knowledge and understanding to:**
 - Grow community capacity around the needs of children and families.
 - Hear and act on children's views and community voices.
 - Lead community safety work to mitigate risks within homes and around localities.
- ✓ Using their **convening power to build and sustain strategic alliances** to meet the diverse needs of local communities and tackle inequalities, for example partnerships to raise awareness of domestic abuse or enhance community mental health support.

- ✓ Reaching out to **local employer and community networks** to provide employability skills and support and local job opportunities.
- ✓ **Intervening early to help families at risk** of tipping into crisis or ill-health and to support **community wellbeing**, for example through social prescribing, leisure programmes, community hubs, and financial inclusion and welfare.
- ✓ **Planning and house building** to help achieve social and economic regeneration.
- ✓ Helping families concerned about **housing or at risk of homelessness**.

CASE STUDIES: These **case studies** showcase initiatives that district councils are already leading to improve outcomes for children, families and local communities. They give just a flavour of the expertise that will be essential in using local **place-based leadership and convening power** to build strategic alliances around children and families and help the new council be the **best place to be a child, a place where communities thrive and families are supported to be the best they can be**.



MANSFIELD DISTRICT COUNCIL: HOUSING-LED COMMUNITY REGENERATION

Being and staying safe at home and in the community is critical and requires district council community engagement expertise and housing experience to bring to a new unitary council a multi-agency focus and action to managing and mitigating risks within homes, online and around localities.

Mansfield District Council epitomises this through its **housing-led regeneration work**.³⁴

Partnership work with local residents on the Bellamy Road Estate highlights **what a difference housing-led regeneration can make in creating a more inclusive, safer and sustainable community for children and families.**

The redevelopment has provided new council owned family homes, a 'village green' with spaces to play and safely cycle, seating, three shops and a café, the start of a community orchard and more accessible bus services.

A hallmark of the project was to listen and learn from residents about **'the issues they faced and their desires for the area. The local community groups and resident groups were vital in ensuring community voice was heard and our plans were spread through local community champions.'**



KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- A **multi-agency focus and action to manage and mitigate risks within homes and around localities.**
- Deep and ongoing **commitment to community engagement.**
- Planning **children and family needs and priorities into social and economic regeneration.**



In planning new unitary councils, let's embrace the challenge of building the best places for children and families. Places which will transform children's lives and life-chances.

TENDRING DISTRICT COUNCIL: WELLBEING HUBS IN SCHOOLS

Every child, whatever their abilities, has an **entitlement to a good education, including good early education**. Schools should be a place where you're visible and valued, a place of opportunity and support, a place where you belong and do well. **Education is the key to economic growth and social mobility**. Educational settings are typically safe and trusted, places with 'eyes on' many children, much of the time. And schools are places, which as primary rolls fall, may have space for **co-located services and new initiatives**.

Tendring District Council is a trailblazer here in the way it has worked with health and university partners to develop **Wellbeing Hubs across 16 primary schools**. The project takes a whole-family approach and is aimed at children with emerging difficulties and those that do not reach the threshold for statutory services.

Great Bentley Primary School is a great example offering children a safe space to spend time using art, science and construction activities to explore self-awareness. It is a place where **mental health doesn't have a stigma**.

The children are able to talk openly about their worries and anxieties which validates them and helps to give them mechanisms to manage them. Put simply, **it sets them up both academically and emotionally for adulthood**.

And importantly we know that **between 25% and 50% of adult mental illness is likely to be preventable with appropriate interventions in childhood and adolescence**. Healthwatch Essex produced a short film with Great Bentley Primary School which features the teachers, children and parents speaking about the initiative:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhKb43e76dg&feature=youtu.be>

Tendring
District Council



KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- Positive **partnership work with schools** pays off in developing **effective preventative provision**.
- **Acting early on mental health and wellbeing concerns benefits children now and helps them into a healthier adulthood** and aligns with NHS direction of travel.
- **Schools are typically trusted places for children and families**.



HINCKLEY AND BOSWORTH BOROUGH COUNCIL: HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE POSITIVE CHOICES

For children, being in the best place to live, learn and grow up means **feeling safe with a sense of belonging**. Children and young people want to know **that their voice matters, and their views are acted on**, with **no decision about me without me**.

Covid cast a long shadow for young people, and many don't feel as **prepared or resilient as they want to be for work and wider adult life**. They worry about their **emotional and mental health and work readiness and opportunity**. Some young people may have been **excluded from school** and lack the support for a second chance, and a small proportion of local young people may have got off track and involved in the **youth justice system**.

Building on **local employer and community networks** and bringing together partnerships that are able to offer **nonjudgmental compassion, support, and belief** will help make sure children know that your place is their place, **a place where they can achieve their full potential**.

Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council is already leading on this through its work to engage with children and young people and help them to **make positive choices**.

The council works closely with local young people and their schools, for example through its:

- **Youth Joint Action Group supporting young people who may be at risk of or involved in anti-social behaviours, to choose and make positive choices.**
- **Mentors in Violence** Programme, a peer mentoring approach giving young people the chance **'to explore and challenge the attitudes, beliefs and cultural norms that underpin violence and bullying.'**³⁵
- **Youth Engagement Activator project**, a preventative health intervention programme that **seeks to address the impacts of Covid on children and young people**, and has supported 59 schools to date.

Hinckley and Bosworth complements this work through a co-produced **Young People's Strategy**, supported by a dedicated children and young people **member champion**, which aims through partnership working to support local young people to be **work-ready** and gain **employment**, make **positive choices** and shape their future, **stay and feel safe**, and be physically and emotionally **healthy**.

Hinckley & Bosworth
Borough Council

KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- **Believe in local young people**, don't give up on them.
- Use **local employer, voluntary and community networks to provide support and opportunities to succeed.**
- **Invest in young people at risk of going off track: they and their communities will stay safer.**
- **Listen and act on what young people are saying about their emotional and well-being needs.**



BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL: INTEGRATED EARLY HELP CLOSER TO HOME

Making it easy to get the right help, from the right people at the right time is vital to supporting children to thrive within their families.

Being able to access inclusive and inviting local family support that **joins up health, housing, social and economic help close to home**, requires **strong place, people and partnership skills** and a deep understanding of existing **community strengths and assets**.

Breckland's 'Build Together Families'³⁶ programme epitomises this through its focus on **helping young people and their families who are on local mental health waiting lists** through a programme of free interactive workshops providing support to explore strategies to promote positive mental health, **commissioned jointly by the council and the Breckland Youth Advisory Board**, a group of local young people who campaign about the issues that matter to them.



KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- Accessible **help close to home** is key to **better prevention**.
- Tackling **rising levels of mental health needs early** improves lives and life-chances.



Assurance is about asking questions and knowing what to do with the answers. Make sure that the assurances you gain, together with the risks and challenges you're aware of, are reflected in your local partnership ambitions, priorities and plans for children.



CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL: SUPPORTING FAMILY WELLBEING

Cherwell District Council³⁷ helps to make it easier for families to **access and enjoy physical activity together by breaking down the cost and availability barriers that prevent them spending time together.**

Cherwell's **'You Move'** project focuses on providing opportunities for families who access free school meals, through either self-referral or referrals from schools, GPs or children's services, to enjoy time together in free multi-sport activities that they can continue at home, with a team of activators providing motivational support. You Move has supported more than 3,500 families so far.

Activities are tailored to take into account cultural needs. Families also receive a membership card that gives them ongoing access to subsidised activities.

The companion **'Move Together'** programme adopts a targeted person-centred approach to people with long-term conditions who need help and support to be more active.

Both programmes are **successfully reducing inequalities by using their understanding and close community connections to help families enjoy time with each other and improve the quality of life for residents with long-term needs.**



KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- Make it easy for families to **stay healthy and well and enjoy time together.**
- **Be sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of families when planning services and support.**



MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL: BEING THERE FOR CARERS

Locally there will be a number of **children who are caring for a family member or friend who has a disability, illness, mental health condition or substance misuse problem.** They carry a heavy, often unrecognised burden and **what really matters to them is to know they are not alone and can access the support they need easily and without stigma.** Mid-Devon recognises and is acting on their needs through the support it is offering.

Mid Devon District Council³⁸ offers support through its **Active Mid Devon service.** In liaison with Devon County Council, it is **piloting free access to leisure facilities for young carers under 18 and discounted support to parent carers of children with disabilities.**

Having a break from caring responsibilities to recharge and prioritise your own wellbeing is both **appreciated and precious.**



KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- **Young carers** carry a heavy lonely burden, sometimes not sufficiently recognised by agencies.
- Enabling young carers to **'be children' and carers of all ages to recharge and prioritise their own wellbeing** for a while is important to **keeping families together.**



Investing in children is about investing in future adults, so that they are proud of their place and ready to work, contribute and live independently.

MELTON BOROUGH COUNCIL: BEING THE BEST CORPORATE PARENT POSSIBLE

Being the **best Corporate Parent possible** means **championing, supporting and staying in touch with children in care and care experienced young people, even when it's difficult.**

Melton Borough Council modelled this when it recognised that a number of privately operated children's homes, looking after children in care from out of area, were causing some **community tensions.**

Melton is supportive of **children's homes and the key role they play in providing care and support** but recognised the importance of balancing the needs of both vulnerable children and local communities. They aimed to find a way for children's homes and local communities to **positively co-exist.**

The Council approached the challenge as a **community leader** to proactively engage with the homes and local residents and achieve shared purpose in **keeping vulnerable children safe** and able to be **present and part of their community.**

It convened a **multi-agency forum** to discuss the complexities associated with children's homes, and to enable an **honest, open and problem solving approach. This proved helpful** during a period of heightened tensions in community understanding of the importance of an incremental approach to **addressing anti-social behaviour** in a way that is supportive, and solution focussed.

At the same time Melton engaged with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to share experiences and highlight the **gap in planning guidance** to help local councils better manage the future development and provision of children's homes. This is now part of the 2025 National Planning Policy Framework.



KEY LEARNING TO USE IN PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING LGR IS:

- **Good Corporate Parents champion children in care living locally in good and in tougher times.**
- **Opening up difficult issues through community engagement enables everyone's voice to be heard.**



PLANNING FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN AN LGR CONTEXT

→ WHAT MATTERS IS:

'To really think about what's best for place and not what's best for our individual organisations and really put our residents and our businesses at the centre and forefront of our thinking and thinking about what is the best model to deliver the things that we know we need to deliver for our place, regardless of our current organisations because our current organisations are going to go, and we need to make sure that they're replaced with something that makes things better and not worse.'

Sam Plum, Chief Executive, Westmorland and Furness, 2025

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MODEL FOR YOUR AREA

There are a range of different models and approaches for delivering and commissioning children's services. The key driver underpinning learning from all of them is the ambition to **improve outcomes for children**.

The debate about LGR has tended to focus on the scale and footprint of proposed unitary arrangements and the perceived risks of disaggregation. This has at times overshadowed the underlying priorities for children's services that matter whatever the size of a new council. What's important is an emphasis on **informed planning that demonstrates understanding of what needs to be in place for a smooth and safe transition for SEND arrangements, children's social care, schools and public health as well as services to support families with housing needs or at risk of homelessness and public safety for residents of all ages**.

And what's **enduring are the strengths and value district councils can bring to this agenda**.

New Smaller Unitaries: Generally new unitary councils will be smaller than their predecessors. The focus has to be about finding an approach that offers the **best opportunity to blend the benefits of local place-based leadership and delivery and, where needed, offers the best ways to achieve economies of scale**.

Initially this centres around the key decision of how far to **collaborate and share or to disaggregate**. This is often framed as a binary choice, but a middle way that some recently established councils have taken is an element of shared services, either with neighbouring councils or on a regional footprint. Shared service collaboration, while it can provide continuity and mitigate some delivery challenges, also presents risks. But, handled carefully, shared services don't have to tie a new council into permanent arrangements.

Children's services won't flourish in a silo culture but need effective cross-council working to succeed.



ACHIEVING THE RIGHT BLEND OF DISAGGREGATION AND COLLABORATION

There are benefits and risks to any model for delivering Children's Services in a new unitary council.

Disaggregation brings **visible local control** but presents some significant immediate **strategic, legal and operational set up challenges**, around recruiting and retaining staff, particularly at senior levels.

Collaboration and sharing offer **more continuity but provide less ownership** and demand leadership able to ensure accountability and *'drive a coherent vision while respecting what works locally.'*³⁹

Many larger councils will be promoting a collaboration approach to provide stability,

Make an early, informed and intentional decision about whether to disaggregate or collaborate on children's services.

but this can cut across local relationships and place-leadership which are vital to informing the **shift towards multi-agency locality working to provide early help and support** to keep children safe and help families thrive

To avoid **disruption to vulnerable children and families**, it is vital to make an **early, informed and intentional decision** about how far to disaggregate Children's Services and what, if any, services to share with other councils or partners.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN:

DISAGGREGATION	COLLABORATION
STRENGTHS:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Local ownership from the start ✓ Aligns with direction of travel of key partners towards neighbourhood and community working ✓ Builds on district council strengths in place-based leadership, prevention, early help and collaboration ✓ Communication is personalised and relates to local priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Offers opportunities to secure economies of scale while not sacrificing area based delivery and local relationships ✓ Some key partners already operate across proposed footprint which facilitates engagement ✓ Recruitment and retention of staff is likely to be easier
LIMITATIONS:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recruiting and retaining staff, particularly at senior levels, can be a challenge ■ Potential for initial workforce uncertainty and anxiety ■ Early and detailed planning to transfer records and data and establish new case management and ICT systems is both vital and complex ■ Need to invest in strategic and operational alignment with key partners, whose scope may cover a wider footprint ■ May lose opportunities for economies of scale in specialist provision, for example in SEND or fostering, but this can be mitigated through developing regional partnership arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Local identity and loyalties will be tested ■ Significant work to align: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cultures and ways of working - social care practices - workforce pay, terms and conditions - case management systems - staffing structures - partnerships and stakeholder relationships ■ Predecessor authorities may have different Ofsted ratings and different improvement priorities to align ■ Critical not to lose local voices and views from children, families and frontline practitioners

Whichever approach is chosen Ofsted will look closely at how effective services are in securing the best outcomes for children and families.



POTENTIAL DELIVERY OPTIONS

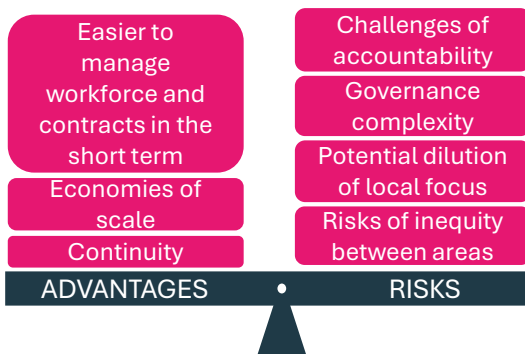
After the key disaggregation or collaboration decision, there are decisions to be made about the specific **delivery model**. These are set out by **Mutual Ventures**⁴⁰ in the model options below:



Potential Delivery Model Options

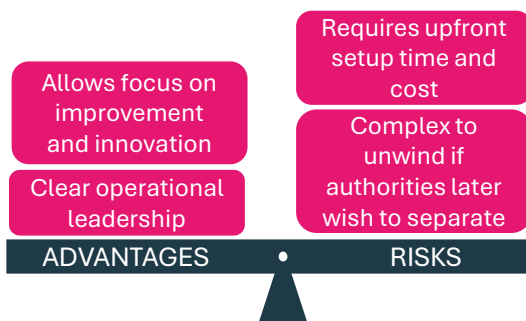
1. Shared Services Model

One authority (typically the largest or most experienced) hosts and delivers Children's Services on behalf of all or some of the new authorities, under a formal shared services agreement or delegation. This could work in both options outlined.



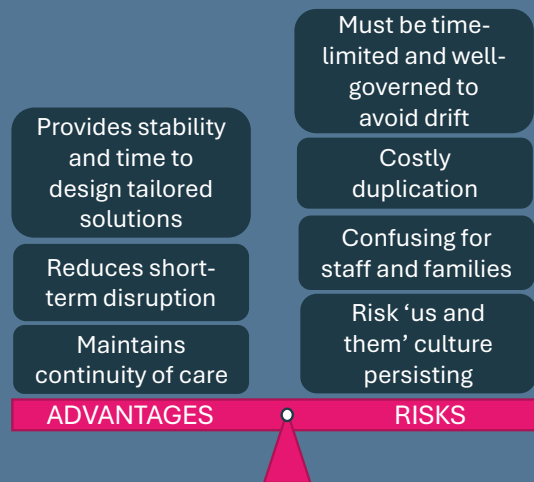
2. Joint Children's Services Trust

The new authorities could jointly create a wholly-owned or jointly commission a Children's Trust to deliver services across boundaries. This can provide operational independence, while retaining accountability through a joint governance board. This could work in both options outlined.



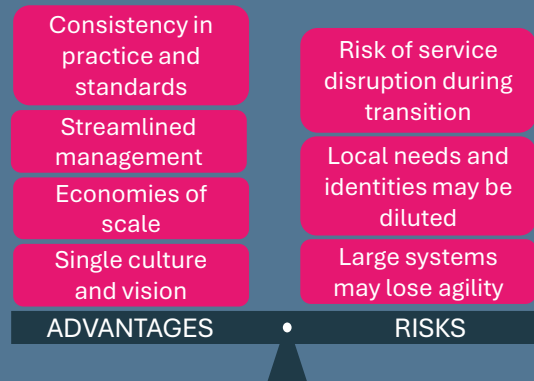
3. Transitional Planning

Former council Children's Services functions continue to operate largely separately for a defined period (e.g., 1 – 2 years), during which longer-term arrangements are co-designed and implemented. This is a disaggregated model.



4. Full Integration Model (Single System)

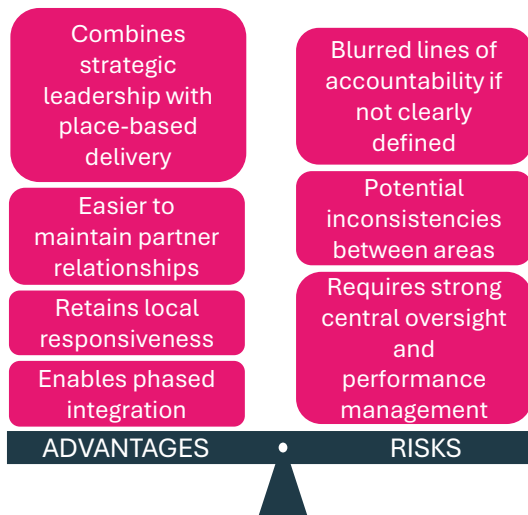
All legacy Children's Services functions (e.g. early help, social care, SEND, education services) are merged into a single, unified structure, operating consistently across the new authority. This is a disaggregated model.



Delivery Model Options (cont.)

5. Central Leadership , Diffuse Delivery

The new authority operates a single Children’s Services directorate, but delivery is decentralised into locality-based teams aligned to former council areas or other geographies. This could work in both options .

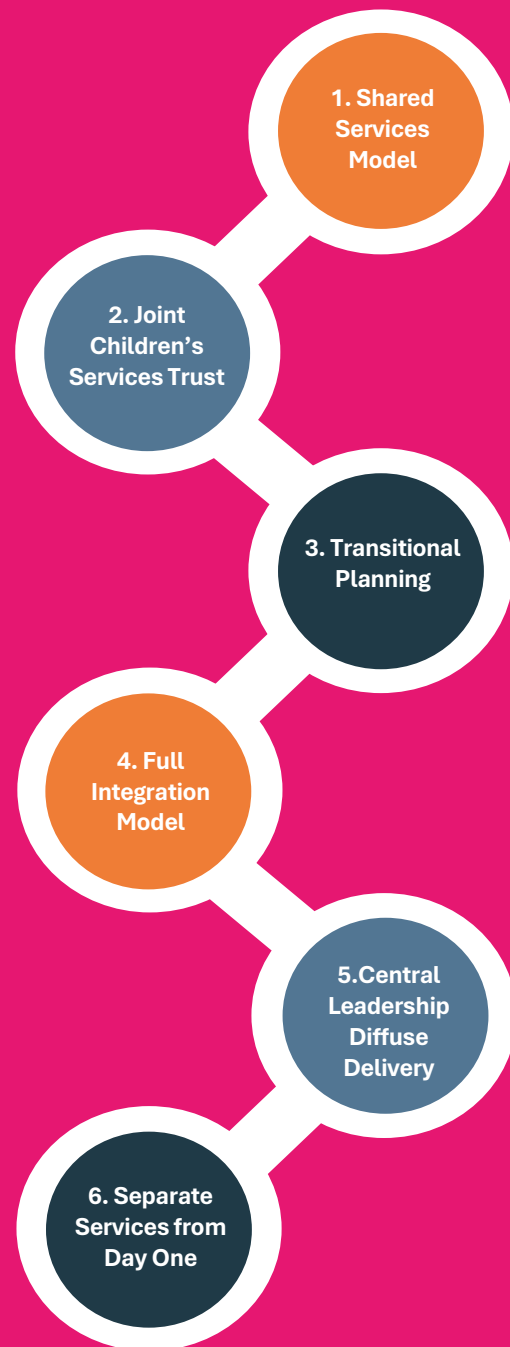


6. Separate Services from Day One

Each new unitary stands up its own Children’s Services structure and workforce, with local leadership and systems. This is a disaggregated model.



Summary of Delivery Model Options



REGIONALISATION



REGIONALISATION IS LIKELY TO GAIN TRACTION AND HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN RELATION TO LGR PLANNING AND DEVOLUTION.

Regional arrangements are a growing response to achieving economies of scale and a joint response to shared challenges. Considering the scope for these can be really helpful for new authorities.

Regionalisation is likely to gain traction and highlights the importance of a regional perspective and partnership for children and families in relation to LGR planning and devolution, for example:

- **Regional Care Cooperatives (RCC)** are council-led bodies working with health and youth justice partners to plan and commission placements for children in care. Greater Manchester and the South East are piloting RCCs to test out the potential for a wider roll out.
- There is a strong link between **accessible childcare and parents being in employment**, particularly mothers. However, access to childcare is not evenly spread across the country. Families in advantaged, affluent areas tend to have better access to childcare, and more choice, than those in poorer areas, so **build into economic growth planning how to better target new childcare provision in areas with low access**.
- Think early on about provision for **children with SEND who have low incidence but high-cost needs**. No footprint will have all the specialist provision needed but joint commissioning through a regional partnership could be really helpful.





IMPLEMENTING CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN NEW UNITARY COUNCILS

The case studies in this section exemplify the different approaches taken to disaggregating services when previous county council areas are broken up into more than one unitary council.

The councils chosen all have a population below 500,000, ranging from under 200,000 to over 400,000. They have different demographics: urban, rural and mixed. All are currently performing well.

In children's services, you learn quickly that a sense of place is often a child's first sense of safety.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE: CHILDREN'S TRUST MODEL



Northamptonshire
Children's Trust

Two unitary councils were established in **Northamptonshire** in 2021, **West** and **North Northamptonshire**. They retained the independent **Children's Trust**, set up in 2020 to deliver children's social care and early help services to both new councils. The Trust also runs fostering and adoption services for children. Both councils have a DCS in place and the Trust's Chief Executive is a former DCS. The new councils retain responsibility for SEND and education services.

Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) is owned by the two councils but is managed and run independently by a Board, which includes council nominees. NCT works collaboratively with the councils and other key partners such as health, police and the voluntary sector to deliver the best outcomes for children, young people and families, by:

- promoting the welfare and safeguard children in line with key children's legislation and statutory guidance.
- providing family support to vulnerable children and their families to enable them to cope with difficulties.
- supporting children to live safely with their immediate and extended families wherever possible.
- meeting the needs of looked after children and those leaving care; and support disabled children and their families.

NCT is one of only two Children's Trusts that delivers services for more than one council. Learning from Northampton is that in the context of a history of corporate failure across the predecessor council, the Trust has:

- Enabled a **resolute focus on children and families**.
- Ensured **staff are supported** and empowered.
- Offered a **balance of independence coupled with productive working relationships** with the new councils and partners.

The Trust arrangements are making a real difference in children's lives and enabling a successful drive for steady and sustained improvement to stay on track.

LEARNING FROM THIS APPROACH:

- There's **no one trust model**: some trusts include all children's services; others encompass children's social care, targeted early help and the youth justice service, with the LA retaining support and oversight of schools and SEND arrangements.
- **Accountability and reporting lines are key**.
- Most Trust arrangements follow an inadequate Ofsted assessment and **improvements can take many years and substantial investment**.
- **Key benefit** is '*an unwavering and untrammelled focus on children. Every single member of the organisation is there to deliver improved outcomes and experiences for children and families.*'⁴¹
- A trust can give Children's Services in councils with a **long history of intractable problems** a fresh start and independence from wider problems within the council.
- A DfE evaluation highlighted a range of Trust **operational and political challenges**:
 - high set-up costs
 - high levels of bureaucracy, for example the need to set up a separate organisation and IT systems.
 - potential for a lack of clarity around roles and accountabilities.
 - long-term desirability of split governance within LA children's services and whether this provides the best solution for meeting the needs of all children.
- The current Government has signalled that it does not view children's trusts as suitable vehicles for setting up Children's Services in new councils due to the cost, complexity and risk of diluting accountability from the council.

BEDFORDSHIRE: TWO SEPARATE CHILDREN'S SERVICES FROM DAY ONE



Central
Bedfordshire

Bedfordshire separated in 2009 into two new unitaries; **Bedford Borough Council** and **Central Bedfordshire Council**. Each appointed its own DCS and leadership team and adopted its own delivery model.

The context for Children's Services has changed significantly since the establishment of the new councils. Both boroughs historically:

- Experienced workforce capacity and recruitment challenges.
- Established strong strategic relationships with key partners but in some areas of practice these took much longer to translate into effective joint working at the frontline.
- Found that, while members were keen to be good Corporate Parents, it took some time for children in care to feel they had positive links with them and senior leaders.
- Initially the councils operated some shared service arrangements covering fostering and adoption, support for asylum seeking young people, youth offending, family group conferencing and emergency duty team (a team providing out-of-hours response to urgent safeguarding children issues). For a short time, the councils also operated a shared Safeguarding Children Board.
- Subsequently each council developed its own arrangements. Currently the two councils share a Director of Public Health and a core public health team.

What's important is not to hark back to a different world, but what's happening in the councils now.

BEDFORD BOROUGH NOW:

- Political support remains strong.
- Support for children and families is central to corporate and strategic partnership decisions.

- Partnership working is effective.
- Leaders are visible and approachable and have built a positive, relationship based culture in their work with practitioners and families.
- Children's views are heard and acted on.
- Workforce challenges remain.

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE NOW:

- Children and families are a high priority for the council, with strong political and financial support for children's services.
- Leaders know the service well, are accessible and approachable, and are responsive to changes in demand.
- Locality working is embedded.
- Action by leaders is successfully impacting in establishing a stable workforce and manageable workloads.
- Particular strengths are relational social work with families and the quality of direct work with children.

LEARNING FROM THIS APPROACH⁴²:

- Understanding **constancy, focus and determination to drive improved outcomes for children is critical**.
- Enabled strong **local ownership and services**.
- Supported **political and community identity**.
- Significant **challenges in recruiting and retaining experienced staff**, especially at senior levels, but possible to combat this through focused leadership work.
- Initial **duplication of back office functions**.
- **Shared service arrangements** are often short lived.
- **Challenges** in delivery of some **specialist services**.

Both authorities are now delivering well for children.

CUMBRIA: TWO SEPARATE CHILDREN'S SERVICES FROM DAY ONE



In 2023, six district councils and Cumbria County Council were reorganised into two unitary councils, **Cumberland Council and Westmorland and Furness Council**. Both councils are sparsely populated, covering very large areas.

Westmorland and Furness is the third largest authority in England and Wales by geographic area. It has a small population of whom 15% are children aged 0 to 15 across a rural geography. Key aspects of its approach is:

- **Strong alignment** between the **Children's Plan and council priorities**.
- Priorities are driven through **engagement with children and families**.
- Adoption of an **early intervention and prevention Family Help locality offer** implementing a **partnership model of delivery**, which includes Health partners, Police, Education, Local Authority, Voluntary and Community sectors working together to identify needs within families as early as possible.
- **Clear governance arrangements** through a Family Help programme Board, Safeguarding partnership, Strategic Education Alliance and a SEND partnership Board.

LEARNING FROM THIS APPROACH IS:

- **Common purpose for children and families** across the council and with partners is essential.

- Build in **engagement with children and families** from initial planning onwards.
- **Respond to what you're hearing** from them.
- Understanding **constancy, focus and determination to drive forwards improved outcomes for children is critical**.
- Using **community and partnership support** to help deliver coordinated, connected and integrated family help through **place-based family help hubs** which include both a physical and virtual offer.
- **Communicate** constantly and effectively about plans and priorities.

A year after inception, Ofsted highlighted the effectiveness of its approach to delivery, with a particular emphasis on the:

- Firm establishment of **a unique identity** for the new unitary children's services.
- Council's **relentless drive for improvement**.
- **Shared vision for children across the workforce and with partners** which is supporting service improvements.
- Ways in which it **listens and acts on what children say matters to them and their families**.
- Swift action to **recruit to and stabilise the workforce**.

Close, connected communities, coupled with strong, passionate and ambitious leadership, will give children the best possible start in life and provide good support and services to them and their families.

DORSET: REORGANISING INTO TWO UNITARY COUNCILS

In 2019, nine councils in **Dorset** were reorganised into two new unitary authorities: **Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP)**, and **Dorset** against a context of increased demand and budget pressures.

At inception leaders from both councils shared the commitment that the change would help protect local services, boost economic growth, reduce costs and provide more efficient councils structured around communities.

Dorset and BCP's predecessor county councils had a track record of shared services, particularly in the areas of public health, planning and IT infrastructure and aspects of support for adult social care. In relation to children's services, up until earlier this year, Dorset and BCP shared public health services, but these are now delivered separately to better meet distinct local needs.

DORSET COUNCIL:

In its latest Ofsted report, **Dorset's family focused approach is highly praised**, *'Children in Dorset receive exceptional services that help meet their needs and reduce risks, supporting them to have better experiences and reach their potential.'*

- The council and its partners have **harnessed place-based leadership** to adopt and embed a child centred locality team model which provide a 'multi-disciplinary team around the child and adults in the family.'
- Six locality teams bring together early help, children's social care, educational psychology and SEND services to provide consistent support for families within a practice framework which

emphasises **strengthening families and communities and working with them and partners to create a bright and ambitious future for children, their families and the communities they live in.**

'Family help locality-based services are successful in achieving consistency across the county. This way of working means that families receive a continual service by the same practitioners until it is no longer needed, while families become linked into community early intervention and prevention services as part of Dorset's Strategic Alliance plan. Easy access to universal and universal plus provision is seen as crucial.'

- The council has taken a long-term view of making sure children thrive and families are supported to be the best they can be through its **Dorset Strategic Alliance for Children and Young People, a multi-agency partnership.**
- **The Strategic Alliance** brings together senior people from the council, police, health, fire and rescue services, schools, early years settings and the voluntary and community sector to shape and transform services for children and young people in ways that achieve improved outcomes.
- The partnership's '10 year and beyond' plan recognises that a **focus on children and young people is crucial to the future wellbeing and prosperity of Dorset.**

LEARNING FROM DORSET'S APPROACH⁴³ IS:

- *'As a result of becoming a Unitary Authority they were able to take **better and more joined-up decisions** on issues that cut across building, planning, transport, inclusion and children and families.'*⁴⁴
- The importance of a **focus on place and continuity.**
- **Area-based service delivery** maintained strong **partner relationships**, especially with schools and health providers.





- **Clear vision and effective communications from political and executive leaders** helps to set and manage expectation and reassure staff and communities.
- Early investment in organisational development to support **co-design of new values and culture across local teams** has paid off.

BOURNEMOUTH, CHRISTCHURCH AND POOLE COUNCIL:

Initially the new council encountered **'significant challenges in aligning different operating models, data systems, and organisational cultures.'**⁴⁵ But after a challenging start, children's services are now performing well.



LEARNING FROM BCP IS THE IMPORTANCE OF:

- Providing **early support for new political leaders** so there is a clear vision and shared goals across the organisation.
- Proactively **engaging with local communities and partners to build trust and understand local priorities.**
- **Investing in cultural change alongside structural change** to mitigate the risks of post-merger frictions around, for example, practice and thresholds.
- Planning early for **safe and effective digital integration.**
- **Maintaining focus on performance and safeguarding** – leadership instability and poor change management are significant risks during transition.



IMPLEMENTING LGR EFFECTIVELY: KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Whatever model is chosen there are some **key considerations** to take into account:

- ✓ Each new authority will legally become a **'Children's Services Authority'** and has to:
 - **Appoint a DCS**
 - **Secure multi-agency safeguarding partnerships**
 - **Ensure education and SEND provision**
 - **Establish access to effective early help and social care services**
- ✓ **Each individual authority will be inspected** to judge the impact and oversight of Children's Services arrangements on experiences and outcomes for children. Ofsted will look closely at how effectively services have been integrated or separated.
- ✓ Disaggregation or collaboration decisions will have **enduring implications so assurance on implications for effectiveness, stability, impact and outcomes is essential.**
- ✓ **Political support for chosen approach is vital.**
- ✓ Ensuring **safe and secure case management and data systems**, both during and after transition is critical.
- ✓ Assurance that any **shared arrangements** are clear on:
 - **Governance**
 - **Accountability for safeguarding and performance**
 - **Risk management**
 - **How children and families voice is heard and acted on**
 - **Community engagement**
 - **Duration**
- ✓ **'Safe and Legal on Day 1' matters for children and families, but arguably day 2, week 2, year 2 and beyond matter even more.**

Whatever tools, enablers or metrics you use, the non-negotiable important stuff is the quality of leadership, the clarity of vision and values, the culture of high support and high challenge, adequate resourcing and having the workforce to deliver day-in, day-out.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN DECIDING WHICH MODEL(S) COULD BE SUITABLE FOR YOUR LOCAL CONTEXT

In any approach to planning large scale transformation for children's services, as well as the risks and benefits of the delivery model, it is important to understand which 'enablers' are in place, which may need more attention, and which are likely to militate against the approach.

Build on local place knowledge in managing large scale change across Children's Services:

All the parties to LGR decisions bring with them local knowledge and wisdom. In choosing which planning option and delivery mechanism to provide the best services for children and families, use **design principles** which embed the importance of structures which:

- Enable children's services to operate as an **integrated whole**.
- Recognise **place matters** by capturing and building on the inter-relationship between children, families and communities.
- Align with and support partnership working, **promote cross-council working**, and are underpinned by a **unified evidence-based model of practice**.

And consider which **enablers are in place**, which may need more attention, and which are likely to mitigate against your chosen approach.

LGA identified nine key enablers⁴⁶: longevity, political impetus, leadership and vision, communication, engagement and co-production, culture and staff stability, governance and accountability, detailed planning and dedicated resources, and IT and management information.

Applying these in the context of LGR structural change highlights the importance of:

✓ Longevity:

- Giving a **long-term commitment** to a particular structural model to create stability, continuity and an environment for high-quality practice to flourish.
- Taking time to plan **how support and services for children and families will work** is essential, as is **'constancy in implementing change'**.
- **Appointing senior officers early in the process helps** achieve this commitment, **'Over time the effectiveness of any council children's service will probably turn on the effectiveness of the DCS'**.⁴⁷

✓ Political impetus:

- Having **strong political backing** to support change is essential.
- Political understanding that **Children's Services are complex and volatile** and deal with issues of sensitivity and fragility.
- Elected members are powerful advocates and influencers so the **early appointment of a shadow cabinet is key**.

✓ Leadership and vision:

- A clear vision of **'why we are doing this'** articulating how the approach will make a difference for children and families and lead to better outcomes for them will **attract and motivate staff**.
- **Leaders who are visible, values based, focused on practice and performance, open and approachable and 'both able and willing to listen'** will help staff to feel invested, safe and supported to manage risk through periods of significant change.

✓ Communication:

- Setting out the bigger picture about local children and families and the difference individuals and teams can make, gives everyone a sense of **connection and belonging**.
- In any large scale change mechanisms to **keep people up to date with what's happening is essential**. Breaking news quickly fuels a rumour mill.

✓ Engagement and Co-production:

- Children and families want to tell their story once and for **services and support to join up around them**.
- Learn from children and families where the silos and barriers are and, critically, **respond and act on their feedback**.
- Triangulate this by **listening to and learning from staff and partners** about what's working and what they feel is getting in the way.

✓ Culture and staff stability:

- A key challenge *'is how to make the experience feel different and positive for staff, and how to create the conditions that ensure **staff retention and continued recruitment** both during the process of restructuring itself and as the new organisational form matures.'*⁴⁸

- **Social workers won't stay where they don't feel valued and trusted:** somewhere they can share their emotions, discuss difficult cases, receive good supervision and support, in a service that isn't risk averse or rushes to blame.
- What encourages **commitment and retention** is a service culture which supports learning in a complex and challenging environment.

✓ Governance and accountability:

- Need to be clear about **oversight and reporting lines**, supported by transparent **performance management and quality assurance** processes and good **quality, accurate data** – never forgetting that behind all the percentages and numbers are real children and families.

✓ Detailed planning and dedicated resources:

- A constant theme from large scale change in children's services is the need for dedicated **project and programme management** supported by HR, finance and legal resource to keep the change process on track.
- The importance of **keeping support in place** for some time after the 'go live' date to deal with legacy issues.

✓ IT and management information systems:

- Ensuring **effective data transfer** and identifying the **right case management system** is a big responsibility.
- **Safely transferring the right children and family records in a LGR context is a significant and sensitive task.**

ASSURANCE TESTS

Whatever operating model is chosen there are **advantages and risks**. So, use these assurance tests against the delivery option you think will work best for 'your place'.

Governance will work, including ensuring:

- Key leadership posts, especially the **DCS and the LMCS** for each new council are in place early.
- Clarity about **reporting and accountability arrangements on performance and safeguarding**.
- Robust **member scrutiny arrangements**.
- **Effective Corporate Parenting** responsibilities.
- Arrangements and shared accountability for **multi-agency working**.
- **Workforce stability** and confidence.
- Joint **oversight of any shared services**.

Financial sustainability will be achieved, including ensuring:

- **The full costs of delivery of children's services** is transparent and known.
- Any **joint funding and commissioning agreements** are fairly apportioned.
- **Frontline budgets are protected** during transition.
- **Transitional costs**, especially around digital integration and workforce integration, are built in.
- **DSG budgets** are stable and ringfenced for school support & high needs funding.

Partnership working to achieve the best outcomes for children will be promoted, including ensuring:

- Fostering **common purpose** and cross-council working.
- Collaborative and integrated **multi-agency arrangements** with clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.
- Effective **data sharing protocols and integrated systems** to support early intervention and enable better decision making.

USING A MATURITY MATRIX MODEL

Colin Foster, Chief Executive of the Northampton Children's Trust, offers a Children's Services Maturity Matrix⁴⁹ which is useful as a **practical self-assessment tool to inform discussions and options for LGR**. The matrix uses a five point scale across seven key aspects of Children's Services:

- **Inspection Outcomes**
- **Quality of Practice**
- **Workforce Stability**
- **Local Area Partnership**
- **Financial Sufficiency**
- **Effectiveness of Corporate Support**
- **Effectiveness of Political Support**

'Developing a judgement on each level of maturity on the scale of 1-5 in the 7 areas will lead to a structured discussion and effective articulation of where Children's services are at'.

While not a fixed model, **'an honest self-assessment of services against a maturity matrix creates a good starting place when considering LGR, helping to create a plan and risk log'⁵⁰ to highlight opportunities and risks.**

*'It is within the gift of political leadership and officer leadership of LAs to create the right conditions which empower professionals in Children's Services and deliver **the best possible outcomes for children, young people, families and care experienced young adults**. LGR is a **real opportunity to do this incredibly well**, but if not done well can cause challenges for many years and continually fail residents'.*

He proposes five grade descriptors for each level of maturity and shows these in a completed table:

Children's Services Maturity Matrix

<p>Inspection Outcomes</p>	<p>Quality of Children's Services Practice</p>	<p>Workforce Stability</p>	<p>Local Area Partnership Approach</p>	<p>Financial Sufficiency</p>	<p>Effectiveness of Corporate Support</p>	<p>Effectiveness of Political Support</p>
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There is systemic understanding, activity and impact of children's service practice and QA. CYP play an active part in assessing the quality of services and driving continuous improvement. Data shows strong performance.

Children's Services workforce held in high regard, recognised, and celebrated. There is a high number of care experienced young people employed. Data shows low turnover of workforce and swift appointments.

The partnership has a clear plan which is underpinned by excellent relationships and strong impact can be evidenced.

Financial planning is joined up and fully resourced. Plans adapt as transformation progresses and there has been significant impact.

Corporate support for Children's Services is embedded in everything people do. It flows from top to bottom and is aligned with public outcomes.

Political support for Children's Services is embedded in everything people do. It flows from top to bottom and is aligned with public outcomes.

5 Inspection outcomes are improving with increased consistency of positive feedback and judgements. There are strong plans to improve, and impact is clearly evident.

QA of practice is articulated well and has a demonstrable impact on outcomes. There is some involvement of CYP in assessing the quality of services and driving continuous improvement. Majority of data shows strong performance with some small areas for development.

There is a fully coherent approach to recruitment and retention in an aspirational workforce plan. The workforce feel valued and supported.

The partnership plan is clear, there is commitment from all partners to deliver the plan and some impact can be evidenced.

Financial planning is understood by all and clear plans are in place with demonstrable impact.

There is some strong corporate support for Children's Services in most services that is articulated in different ways.

There is some strong political support for Children's Services in most services that is articulated in different ways.

4 Inspection outcomes are variable with some improvements in some areas but this is not consistent. There are strong plans in place to improve with some impact.

There are some good examples of QA and some impact on practice can be demonstrated. There is some meaningful involvement of CYP. Data shows some strengths with targeted areas for development.

There is some join up in approach to recruitment and retention but there has been little impact. Some of the workforce can see the improvements.

The partnership understands the need to improve, there are good relationships and variable impact can be evidenced but better planning is needed.

Financial planning has the right level of detail with some plans, but impact is variable.

There is variable corporate support for Children's Services but plans in place to improve.

There is variable political support for Children's Services but plans in place to improve.

3 Inspection outcomes are of a low standard and plans to improve are not coherent.

There is inconsistent QA of practice which has little impact and data is concerning.

There are some variable approaches to recruitment and retention with high levels of agency workforce.

There is an increasing awareness of the need for partnership working to improve services with some developing relationships but limited impact.

There are some financial initiatives to enable improvement, but they are ad hoc and do not show a full understanding of the requirements needed.

There is low effectiveness of corporate support for Children's Services variable understanding.

There is low effectiveness of political support for Children's Services variable understanding.

2 Inspection outcomes are poor and there is ineffective planning to improve.

There is no effective QA of practice and data is concerning.

There is no sustainable workforce plan for recruitment and retention and there are high levels of vacancies / agency workforce.

The partnership is not joined up, relationships need to develop and there is no evidence of impact.

There is no joined up financial planning in place and lack of shared understanding about priorities for improvement. Plans are not flexible or achievable.

There is little or no corporate support for Children's Services and high levels of tension.

There is little or no political support for Children's Services and high levels of tension.

'Children's Services Maturity Matrix', Colin Foster, CEO Northamptonshire Children's Trust (research undertaken with University of Northampton), 2025

Use the Maturity Matrix in looking at the proposed footprint for the new council:

✓ **Inspection Outcomes:**

- Find out all the latest **inspection data and the current improvement gradient**: you need more than just a snapshot picture.

✓ **Quality of Performance:**

- Use the **3 key questions** to get beneath the surface of how Children's Services is performing:
 - What do you know about the **quality of service, delivery and impact?**
 - **How do you know it?**
 - What is planned to **address areas of weakness and risk?**
- Recognise that bringing together **different practice models and QA arrangements** can be challenging.

✓ **Workforce Stability:**

- What will best support **workforce alignment, stability and culture** and retain skilled leaders and practitioners?

✓ **Local Area Partnership:**

- Where do **partner services** across your local geography currently sit on the matrix?
- Are **key partners playing their part?**

✓ **Financial Sufficiency:**

- Are the **true service delivery costs clear?**
- Are there any **inequities in current joint arrangements?**

✓ **Effectiveness of Corporate Support:**

- How will you build **common purpose and cross-council working for children and families?**

✓ **Effectiveness of Political Support:**

- Do **elected members understand and support the proposed approach to Children's Services?**

✓ **Additionally:**

- What else needs to be added or amplified on the matrix to **reflect local issues?**
- Where might **regional developments** sit on the matrix for you?

In relation to LGR planning, this Risk Register⁵¹ based on a model developed by Colin Foster, Chief Executive, Northampton Children's Trust, provides a good basis for discussions with Councillors, colleagues and partners:

Leadership Continuity	LGR can result in senior leaders across the LA(s) retiring or in some cases being made redundant.
Workforce Alignment	LGR can mean a split of countywide children's services, resulting in the workforce having to choose an LA. This can mean at least one new council having a less experienced children's services leadership team and wider workforce.
Financial Stability	Ineffective financial planning around the whole LA system that supports children's services and service reductions can lead to significant, unexpected additional costs such as children's homes provision, housing for care experienced young adults, workforce pay and reward offer, early help provision. Cross boundary delivery models also rely on council investment into the infrastructure.
Equality, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDIEB)	EDIEB is a priority consideration. Much work has already taken place to embed EDIEB across councils, but there is more to do. Commitments can become disjointed and dissipate through the LGR process.

Corporate Parenting	Corporate parenting is a priority across all LGR plans. LAs have a moral and statutory responsibility to be the best possible corporate parent for children in care and care experienced young adults and commitment to fulfilling this duty can become disjointed and dissipate through the LGR process.
Shared Support Services	While the logic of shared services can make sense as separate councils evolve post LGR, a disconnect between newly established councils almost always occurs over a period of years, despite good intentions at inception. This most often applies to support services such as IT, housing, transport, HR, finance, communications and marketing and training.
Corporate Leadership	Lack of experience or willingness to consider experienced views in Children's Services can lead to ill-informed decision making and added risk. This often focuses on short term financially led decision making with long-term impact.
Political Leadership	Lack of experience or willingness to consider experienced views in Children's Services can lead to inaccurate advice to elected members from senior officers leading to ill-informed decision making and added risk.
Children's Services Leadership	Poor leadership of children's services gives poor advice to corporate and political leadership leading to ill-informed decision making and increased risk. Often this can stem from a serial interim with little or no track record as a DCS or in some cases an inexperienced DCS.
Workforce Recruitment and Retention	Significant structural change can unsettle the workforce and lead to an exodus if plans are not clear or well communicated.
Services for Children	Significant structural change can lead to an inexperienced workforce which has a negative impact on services for children.
Delivery of Families First Partnership Reforms	Families First reforms are to be implemented by 2027 with significant planning and pilots required across the partnership. Attention on LGR may divert focus.
Partnership Relations	Relationships with partners can suffer as a result of new structures and changes in workforce. This can significantly impact on how safeguarding partnerships and 'front door' arrangements work. Important to consider health and police structures and how these align with LGR plans.
Creation of an Alternative Delivery Model	Children's Trusts have a strong record of improving services under DfE statutory intervention, but in all but one case this is an intervention rather than a strategic council decision. Having Children's Services outside of the council can lead to 'blame' and criticism from the council(s) involved which destabilises effective services for children and families.

Based on Risk Register - Children's Services LGR in 'The Maturity Matrix', by Colin Foster, CEO Northamptonshire Children's Trust (research undertaken with University of Northampton), 2025

Any single one of these risks will have an adverse effect, the impact of a combination of them will have a significant and widespread impact. Important in relation to your design principles and implementation plans, to assess the likelihood and impact of each for your local area.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

WHAT'S NEXT?

→ LEARNING FROM THE SECTOR

'Supporting children well means they will grow up to be less expensive adults – look through an economic lens with a longer view for children. Within one or two decades they're the potential local workforce for the area, champion their health and wellbeing from the start and they'll be healthier and less of a drain on NHS resources – get it right for children and you'll get it right for the population as a whole.'

Sam Plum, Chief Executive of Westmorland and Furness Council and previously chief executive of one of the predecessor district councils, reflected recently on her LGR learning.

HER LEARNING:

- Be prepared for **changes in political control** in the shadow authority.
- **Recognise there will be fewer councillors covering the same geography, responsible for more services**, *'trying to get the balance of wanting to be really local ward councillors, champions of place, getting involved in local issues to some of the bigger strategic services and decisions that we're now responsible for. That unitary councillor role, I think is really different.'*
- **As well as a safe and legal on day one, focus on 'what happens on day two and beyond' infrastructure of:**
 - ensuring a constitution is in place
 - setting the first year budget
 - developing a council plan that everyone can get behind
 - establishing an operating model to provide clarity about priorities, approach and delivery.
- *'The biggest thing we did that really made a difference was recruiting into the director and assistant director posts so that I had a full senior management team from day one and everybody was clear about their role.'*
- Be really **clear about services you can separate out** before vesting day and which ones you can't but have plans in place to disaggregate early on. Separating out small contracts can take *'an inordinate amount of time.'*
- Most staff are subject to TUPE, but that doesn't stop their anxieties about change, so **visibility and regular communication is critical.**
- **'If I'd only known' how complex, expensive, difficult and full of risk it is to separate out a county-level ICT service:** *'I think we would have worked harder at a potentially different solution – actually spending some serious money upfront to buy what we needed and implement it in a different way rather than trying to split what we had.'*
- **Never take your eye off children's services:** Ofsted arrived a year after vesting day and our work paid off, *'we got good, and we now know outcomes for our children are better than they were'* and a recent SEND inspection highlighted that *'things have got better since LGR.'*
- **Despite the challenges, 'no regrets... it's worth it!'**

WIDER LEARNING FROM THE FIELD

The key takeaways from the Cumbrian experience of implementing LGR are echoed in comments from DCSs across the country:

'Seize the opportunity to transform children's lives and life chances: they are our now and our future.'

'The world of tomorrow simply cannot prosper if today's children aren't healthy, educated and protected. Investing in children is a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity: improving outcomes for them means they will be better equipped to stimulate our economy, close health gaps and inequities, and help us be a more productive, innovative, equitable and just society.'

Supporting children well means they will grow up to be less expensive adults - look through an economic lens with a longer view for children.

FOCUS ON CHILDREN

- **Ensure children's voices and views shape the system that supports them.**
- ***'Need won't be evenly spread so think about the proposed post LGR boundaries through a children and family lens'*** – find out:
 - Which are the neighbourhoods where children are living in poverty?
 - How will geography impact multi-agency partnership working?
 - How far are children travelling to school? What's it costing?
 - How many children with EHCPs are being supported locally?
 - Where are your children in care? How far from home are they?
 - Who and where are your care leavers? What would help them most – Housing? A job? Other support?
 - How many migrant children are living locally?
- **Be relentless about seeking assurance** that children and families are safe and getting the support they need.
- **Champion children: *'It's about hearts and minds – a shared moral compass for children.'***
- **Invest in and build local prevention, community resilience and social regeneration** early in LGR planning. **This will support effective outcomes for children and families** as well as align with NHS reforms and the likely direction of travel to emerge from the Casey review of adult social care.



PLANNING FOR VESTING DAY AND BEYOND

- **Be and stay well versed in children's services:** understand all the statutory duties and the scope of children's services but most of all invest in leaders and an approach which will take practitioners, partners and politicians with you.
- **Appoint a DCS with vision, strong strategic leadership expertise and ability to foster a supportive and challenging culture:** someone who:
 - Can hold themselves and their teams to account.
 - Has a deep understanding of the impact and quality of social work practice and a passion to identify and meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.
 - Is effective at building relationships within the council and across the local area so children and families receive coordinated and responsive support.
- **'Appoint your DCS early'** – so they can:
 - Help articulate a clear vision and values to win hearts and minds and support workforce recruitment and retention.
 - Initiate high-quality planning and sufficiency to meet local needs.
 - Inform arrangements to disaggregate and migrate data and establish ICT infrastructure.
 - Promote a unified evidence based model of practice across multi-agency teams that is trauma informed, relational, strengths based and systemic.
 - Pin down risks and challenges early.
- Establish good, open lines of communication between **incoming and outgoing** Chief Executives, DCSs, Leaders and Portfolio Holders **and make sure staff feel heard and held throughout.**
- **Foster cross-council working between predecessor and emerging new councils,** particularly around HR, data migration and finance systems.
- **Retain and attract quality staff** – settled social work teams *'that combine new ideas with seasoned understanding'* are key to successful children's services, whatever the scale and size of the council.
- **Plan for post LGR ICT and children's case management systems early and seriously** – this is likely to be an area where shared services don't work well.
- **Deliver services and support to children and families from day 1,** including effective and safe transfer of data and information to ensure children and families are not left at risk... **and be ready and equipped for day 2 and beyond.**
- **Ensuring 'safe and legal on day 1'** matters, but arguably **day 2, week 2, year 2 and beyond matter even more for children and families.**
- **Understand and benchmark spend...** recognising children's services is about lives and life-chances, not just money.

Most of all invest in planning how to build the best place to be a child, the place where communities thrive and families are supported to be the best they can be. A place residents are proud to call home.

PARTNERSHIPS AND OPERATING MODELS

- **'Boundaries matter. They can help or hinder'**⁵² – time invested in strategic and operational alignment with partner footprints adds huge value to multi-agency work with children and families.
- **Think carefully about any proposed shared services.** *'They almost always disaggregate within a few years of LGR.'*⁵³
- Proactively draw **people, partners and resources together** to enable the best outcomes for children.
- Develop **productive partnership arrangements** to help deliver on your collective **statutory accountabilities and moral responsibility for children.**
- Seize opportunities to establish **locality based co-located neighbourhood teams** that can help families with tailored support in a wide range of needs. Referrals will be better managed through a council wide multi-agency dedicated and skilled team that works with family/early help to protect children who are suffering or are likely to suffer significant harm.
- Build on district council's expertise in **place-based leadership to establish and connect partnerships for prevention**, including housing, safer communities, leisure, green spaces provision, on behalf of children and families.
- **Locally co-produced SEND arrangements on a smaller footprint**, a partnership commitment to meeting needs with ambition and support, together with a regional perspective and joint commissioning for low incidence, high cost placements, can help parent carers feel that their children are visible, valued and able to access the support they need to flourish. *'There's no magic SEND bullet, but commitment in practice from leaders to provide children with the support they need to flourish, accountable partnership governance and quality relationships, strong political support and effective communication about the local roadmap will help.'*

NEXT STEPS

Use this handbook to check out things you might have missed or want to know more about. But, most of all, remember that children's services offers an unparalleled opportunity to make an enduring difference for local children and their families so seize it with both hands.

Amid every other aspect of LGR planning, take time to be the leader children and young people need, want and deserve, so that your place is their place. **Build the best place to be a child**, the place where communities thrive and families are supported to be the best they can be. A place residents are proud to call home.

There's no greater reward than to be making a difference for children, transforming their lives and life-chances.



THANK YOU

A big thank you to colleagues from District Councils' Network, The Staff College, district councils and Children's Services across the country for sharing their leadership insights to inform LGR planning in ways that will help achieve sustained improvements in the lives of local children and families:

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-
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-

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- **Colin Pettigrew**, Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Schools, Nottinghamshire County Council
- **James Thomas**, Chief Executive of the Birmingham Children's Trust

RESOURCES

- **'Working together to safeguard children'**, HMG 2023, is a key statutory document to inform multi-agency working: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2> and it's certainly one to have to hand in your files.

Recently a children and young people's version of *Working Together 2023* was published, including a new animation and toolkit, which is accessible and highlights what children can expect from you and partners: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/681b42043f1c73824ee3e4f0/Children_and_young_person_guide_to_working_together_to_safeguard_children.pdf

- **'Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services'**, DfE 2013: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c9fbb5274a30fa38ff4c/directors_of_child_services_-_stat_guidance.pdf is a short but essential 'must read' so you understand the scope of the roles.

- **LGA** has a range of good 'must know' guides about children's services, with a good overview and practical suggestions - really helpful ones include:

- **'Chief Executives 'must know' for children's services'**: <https://www.local.gov.uk/chief-executives-must-know-childrens-services>
- **'Corporate Core cross working'**: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/must-know-childrens-and-corporate-services-guide-effective-cross-council-working>
- **'Must know: safeguarding children'**: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/must-know-safeguarding-children>
- **'Form and function: exploring structural change in children's services'**: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/form-and-function-exploring-structural-change-childrens-services>

The LGA and ISOS partnership have also recently published an updated report on home-school-transport (HTST) for children with SEND, building on earlier analysis from 2019. The report confirms that HTST is becoming financially unsustainable and explores opportunities for future policy change alongside broader SEND reforms: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/council-spending-send-home-school-transport-soars-new-lga-research>

- **The Staff College** publish a range of downloadable publications:
- **'Project 2035'** uses four potential scenarios for children and opens up conversations between leaders in different organisations in different places to support thinking and planning now for future changes for children and young people: <https://thestaffcollege.uk/programmes/project-2035/>
 - **'Leading for Longer'** highlights what attracts, motivates and retains DCSs in post and helps maximise impact for children: <https://thestaffcollege.uk/publications/leading-for-longer/>
 - **'Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) inspection'** is a research briefing about learning from SEND inspections: <https://thestaffcollege.uk/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send-inspection/>
 - **'Just Home: Leading in Colour'** focuses on global majority children in care, their lives, their traumas, their needs and their life-chances: <https://thestaffcollege.uk/publications/just-home/>

- **'Just Fair: spotlight on youth justice'** is a call to action and a helpful resource to support and challenge local leaders to find ways from early childhood onwards to enable global majority children grow up safely and well in local communities and stay out of the youth justice system: <https://thestaffcollege.uk/just-fair-leading-in-colour/>
- **'Why aren't we there? Shining a light on gender equity'** looks at the barriers girls and women face in their daily lives, whether that's in relation to staying safe, learning, being healthy, working and leading: <https://thestaffcollege.uk/publications/why-arent-we-there-shining-a-light-on-gender-equity/>
- Have a look at the **Office for the Children's Commissioner's website**, her work is driven by what children tell her is important to them: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/>.
A helpful recent report is this one about the impact of growing up in poverty: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/growing-up-in-a-low-income-family-childrens-experiences/>
- This **Ofsted blog** has a section on ingredients for success: <https://socialcareinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/05/11/how-do-we-achieve-outstanding-help-and-protection/>
- And this **King's Fund blog** is insightful on 10 key priorities for children's health: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/briefings/ten-actions-government-improve-childrens-health> as is this learning from **'10 years of Children's Public Health in Local Government'** about progress made, challenges faced and opportunities ahead: <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/social-care-health-and-integration/lifestyle-choice-or-no-choice/10-years-childrens-public>
Listen to this short King's Fund podcast on what's in the **NHS 10-year plan** and what happens next: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/podcast/10-year-health-plan-what-is-it-what-happens-next?>
- Have to hand this brief 'roadmap' to **'The Healthiest Generation of Children Ever: a Roadmap for the health system'** from the Children and Young People Health Policy Influencing Group: https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/HPIG%20-%20The%20healthiest%20generation%20of%20children%20ever_0.pdf
- Listen to this **RiP podcast** on engaging with children and families about data: <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/making-better-use-of-children-s-information-data-and-voice/>
- Take a moment to remind yourself why this work is so important (have some tissues to hand) – Samantha Morton's BAFTA dedication to **Children in Care** is an important reminder of why being the best corporate parent matters so much: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=CRWsuuZTRLM>
- **'Listen to us' – young people's views of the SEND system'** is a short blog about the views of the Disabled Children's Partnership: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/listen-to-us-young-peoples-views-of-the-send-system/>
- In case you haven't seen, watch **'The Assembly with Michael Sheen'** – he's engaging with a group of young adults who are autistic, neurodivergent and living with learning disabilities. It's funny, tear jerking and reflective: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001xyj5/the-assembly>

KEY ASPECTS OF THE CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOLS BILL

Safeguarding and Welfare: Aims to prevent vulnerable children from falling through the cracks in services and ensures that all children are kept safe, both at home and in school. It emphasises the importance of early intervention, supported by multi-agency working to keep children and families safely together. At least one multi-agency child protection team (MACPT) must be established in the LA area, to include an education professional (there is a strengthened role for education throughout the bill), a registered health professional with experience of providing healthcare for children, a social worker, and a police officer, together with any other practitioners the LA and its safeguarding partners decide will help meet local need. Safeguarding partners should agree how each agency will work to support the MACPT.

Social Care: Sets out support for children in care or leaving care, including defining kinship carers, developing a kinship care offer and requiring LAs to offer families a group decision-making meeting before applying to take a child into care.

Education Standards: Seeks to improve educational standards and remove barriers to opportunity in schools, ensuring every child can achieve and thrive.

Regulation of Care: Strengthens the regulation of care workers, establishments, and agencies, ensuring high-quality of care.

Support for Families: Measures to support families and keep them together where possible, including offering support to families in accessing resources and services.

Information Sharing and Unique Child Identifier: Clarifies the agencies, including education providers, with a duty to share safeguarding information and recommends a unique identifier (this might be the child's NHS number) for each child to help join up systems and prevent children from falling through the cracks.

Children being Home Educated: LAs will be required to hold a register of children not in school and may require parents to provide information about out-of-school education where there are existing safeguarding concerns or where children were attending special schools.

Schools:

- Limits the number of branded uniform items a school can require pupils to have to ease the financial burden on families.
- Every state-funded schools to provide all children on roll in Reception class to Year 6 with access to a free breakfast club each school day.
- Broadens the full-time education environments that must register as independent schools (this is mainly focused on regulating faith based provisions).
- Requires Academies to employ qualified teachers, follow the National Curriculum and creates a national teachers' pay and conditions framework that includes Academies, and changes the Secretary of State's duty to issue an academy order to a maintained school deemed by Ofsted to be causing concern, into a discretionary power.
- Emphasis on the importance of co-operation on admissions and place planning so that the local community's needs, especially those of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, are met.
- Extends LAs' current powers to direct a maintained school to admit a child, to include academies.
- Ends the current legal presumption that new schools should be academies enabling proposals for other types of school to be put forward where a new school is needed, including from LAs.

Support for Children Leaving Care: Provides support for children leaving care to find accommodation and access services relating to health, education, and employment.

Financial Oversight of Care Providers: Introduces a financial oversight regime for certain independent fostering agencies and children's homes providers.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

As with any profession, Children's Services has its own terminology which can be helpful to know. Remember that behind every term, piece of jargon or abbreviation used is a child, a child who may, for some or much of the time, need professionals in their lives to make sure they get the right help, care and protection, at the right time, from the right people, and they and their families will have a view about the language used about them.

The way we talk with and about children and their families is key to enabling them to feel supported, empowered and hopeful. So, rather than talk about a 'placement' for a child, better to think about and use 'your home', or 'where you live'.

'No one has ever asked me before how I feel about the words adults use ... it's good to be able to share my ideas!'⁵⁴

Abuse – A form of maltreatment of a child or young person. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Harm can include ill treatment that is not physical as well as the impact of witnessing ill treatment of others, for example where a child sees, hears or experiences the impact of domestic abuse. Children may be abused in a family, or in institutional or extra-familial contexts by those known to them or, more rarely, by others. Abuse can take place online, or technology may be used to facilitate offline abuse. Children may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children.

CAMHs – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, a specialist NHS service for children and young people up to age 18.

Care Proceedings – When a local authority needs to get involved with a family to keep a child safe, they may initiate court proceedings, known as care proceedings. All children who are the subject of a care order are 'looked after' by the LA and will have a care plan that they and their families have been part of developing, setting out when they will see (have 'Contact' with) their family.

Child in Need – A child who is experiencing circumstances that are impacting their health or development and needs extra support from Children's Services. Sometimes, this is shortened to section 17, which refers to the Children Act 1989.

Child Protection – The process of protecting children suffering, or likely to be suffering from harm and abuse. You may hear this referred to initially as a section 47 inquiry.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) – Is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group take advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. CSE does not always involve physical contact; it can occur through the use of technology.

Children – Anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. This underpins the importance of a child first approach to, for example, children involved in the criminal justice system. Young people with SEND have the right to have an Education, Care and Health plan up to age 25.

Children in Care – A child who is being cared for (looked after) by the LA.

CAFCASS – The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service support children involved in family court proceedings. Their role is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, making sure their voices are heard, and their best interests are considered by the courts.

Children's homes – The Care Standards Act 2000 states that 'an establishment is a children's home... if it provides care and accommodation wholly or mainly for children'.

Children's Social Care – Children's social care exists to support children, young people and families, to protect children and young people by intervening decisively when they are at risk of harm and to provide care for those who need it so that they grow up and thrive with safety, stability and love.

Children's Trusts – Not-for-profit companies set up to run children's services on behalf of local authorities. Most are set up after an LA is subject to a statutory direction by the DfE typically following an inadequate Ofsted judgement, on the grounds that outcomes for children and prospects for improvement are poor.

Corporate parent – The legal and moral duty of the LA, its councillors and partners to champion and support each of their children in care as any good parent would.

Domestic abuse – The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defined domestic abuse and is clear that domestic abuse may be a single incident or a course of conduct encompassing a wide range of abusive behaviours, including physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, economic abuse, and psychological, emotional or other abuse.

Early help – A multi-agency approach to supporting people to avoid problems or to deal with them to stop them getting worse, designed to help families at the earliest point, improve children's life-chances and reduce demands for crisis services.

Extra-familial harm – Children may be at risk of or experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse and exploitation in contexts outside their families. Children can be vulnerable to multiple forms of extra-familial harm from both adults and/or other children. Examples include criminal exploitation, such as county lines and financial exploitation, modern slavery and trafficking, online harm, sexual exploitation, child-on-child (non-familial) sexual abuse and control, and the influences of extremism which could lead to radicalisation.

Family group decision making – This is the umbrella term for family-led decision making forums, where a family network is supported to make a plan to respond to concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing.

Family network – A group of people close to a child, made up of relatives and also non related connected people. A family network could include stepparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, or close family friends.

Kinship care – Kinship care is any situation in which a child is being raised in the care of a friend or family member who is not their parent. The arrangement may be temporary or longer term.

Looked-after child – A child is looked after by a local authority if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours or are subject to a care order. Many children don't like the term 'looked after' and it's important to use the vocabulary they prefer.

Multi-agency hub (MASH) – A team which brings together agencies (and their information) to identify risks to children early and to respond with the most effective, joint interventions. This is sometimes called the 'front-door'.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA) – Local safeguarding partners' oversight arrangements to ensure that information about a child and their family is shared effectively, risk of harm is accurately identified, understood and acted on and that children and families receive targeted services that meet their needs in a coordinated way.

Multi-agency working – Work across organisations to meet children's needs including effective information sharing, joint decision making and co-ordinated interventions.

Multi-disciplinary working – A range of practitioners and professionals from different backgrounds working together to enable the best outcomes for children.

Parental responsibility – Gives the legal right to keep children safe and make important decisions about their life, like who looks after them, where they live and how they are educated.

Regional adoption agencies (RAAs) – Bring together specialist adoption professionals from LAs across a region to find families for the children with a plan for adoption in their region and provide long-term adoption support for families.

Regional care cooperatives (RCCs) – A developing arrangements between LAs to plan, commission and deliver care places regionally.

Regional improvement and innovation alliances (RIAs) – A collaborative, sector led approach to improving children's services.

Section 17 (refers to section 17 of the Children Act 1989) – Duty to provide of services for 'children in need' in a LA area.

Section 47 (refers to section 47 of the Children Act 1989) – The LA duty to investigate where there is reason to believe a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm.

Secure children's homes – Secure children's homes are residential homes for vulnerable children aged between 10 and 20. These homes restrict children's liberty in order to ensure their safety.

Young Carers – Are children who have important caring responsibilities for a family member who has a disability, illness, mental health problem, or addiction.

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'Building the Best Places for Children and Families'
by Rose Durban, Associate, The Staff College