

Working Together to Safeguard Children

February 2010

Introduction

The Local Government Association (LGA) is pleased to submit its response to the Department's updated *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance.

We are firmly committed to supporting councils, their elected members and officers to improve safeguarding practice across the board. We believe that what keeps children safe is excellent, rigorous and well managed basic practice supported by an explicit framework of systems and processes. We also think that the effectiveness of any action to safeguard a child or young person is reliant on the skill and ability of individuals in applying sound professional judgement.

We therefore recognise the importance of listening to the voice of those who lead and manage social work practice in local authorities and would encourage the Department to read the LGA's submission in tandem with that of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. The Association's expert, professional knowledge of what works and how it can practically be implemented on the ground in local areas across the country forms an important integral part of the local authority response to this consultation.

Demand, Capacity and Resources

Lord Laming¹ believed that the original *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance contained sound practices for children's social workers and other professionals. If well understood and used intelligently and effectively it would result in better quality lives and outcomes for children and young people. However, the evidence was mixed on how well understood the processes outlined in it actually were. Importantly, Lord Laming recognised that there were training and workforce issues to be resolved, and data systems that needed to be improved to support professionals better. Ultimately, he acknowledged that the safety of a child depended on staff having the time, knowledge and skill to understand the child or young person and their family circumstances.

The significant rise in the demand for local child protection services and a 9% increase in the number of looked after children during the period since Lord Laming's report was published means that local authority children's services are operating in very challenging circumstances. The most frequently identified occupation for recruitment difficulties amongst local authorities was children's social workers (increasing from 64 per cent in 2008 to 72 per cent of authorities with recruitment or retention problems in 2009)². The picture was replicated for retention issues, where 60 per cent of authorities with recruitment and retention problems reported having difficulties in retaining children's social workers. These circumstances put increased pressure on the effective management of local services and impact on their ability to ensure that all social workers have the time, knowledge and skills to undertake their jobs effectively.

The Social Work Task Force identified that weaknesses in recruitment, retention, frontline resources and training compound one another and make service improvements difficult to achieve. The current climate in which authorities are working presents significant concern about the ability of the revised guide to impact on practice locally and secure real improvements in safeguarding practice. This is because councils' immediate and critical need for frontline social work resources has not yet been met. While the Task Force's comprehensive reform programme will address many of these deficiencies in the long term (albeit with concerted efforts in the first five years), local authorities require real

¹ The Protection of Children in England: a progress report, 2009

² Local Government Workforce Survey, LGA Group, 2009



assistance to address local needs now. Without this, councils are less likely to have the effective management, supervision and time needed to absorb and implement the good practice presented in this guide.

Partnership Working and Understanding

Forthcoming research commissioned by the LGA identifies variations in the understanding of referral processes and practices between the different (including statutory) agencies. Interviews with frontline managers and practitioners reveal a significant rise in domestic violence contacts and referrals being made. However, while the Police's understanding of referral processes is generally deemed to be good, social work professionals note that in many cases these referrals are failing to meet the thresholds for statutory intervention and that, as a result, they did not have the capacity to respond to them. There is a suspicion that the Police are failing to consider the severity or impact of domestic violence on the child and instead transferring information - and thus responsibility - to children's social care. The understanding of thresholds and the quality of referral information given to children's services from the third sector and youth services was of even greater concern. It points to the need for an increased level of training and awareness amongst partners but also greater understanding of the impact that this behaviour is having on the capacity and resources of local authorities.

Volume

The Concordat³ between HM Government and the LGA recognises central government's right to set national policies, including minimum standards of services but also emphasised government's responsibility to remove any obstacles which prevent councils from pursuing their role, including a reduction in the volume of the guidance it issues to them.

The revised Working Together guidance should give greater consideration to its accessibility to its intended audience. A document of over 300 pages in length is less likely to be comprehensively read by social workers already under intense pressure to deliver front-line services. Indeed, many of the amendments appear to merely restate or give greater emphasis to what was already in the guidance. We would argue that if the existing guidance has not been effective in driving good practice, amending - or indeed adding - to the wording and making the document lengthier is unlikely to produce the desired improvement in outcome. The document should be edited to be made more succinct and the format re-considered making it much more accessible and digestible to busy professionals.

Young People

The current media and government focus on the protection and safeguarding of children in the wake of the Baby Peter case has been both expected and welcome. However, there was concern that there was a vacuum in policy concerning the safeguarding of young people above twelve years. Recent research commissioned from the National Youth Agency (NYA) by the LGA raised concerns about the assumption that by tagging children's safeguarding policies with the addition of "young people" their safety was adequately being addressed. We are encouraged that the particular safeguarding issues that pertain to young people such as sexual exploitation, dangerous streets, suicide and self harming, neglect, threats from peers/others and the online and virtual world have been better addressed in the refreshed guidance.

Local Government Association
February 2010

³ Central Local Concordat, HM Government, 2007

