# Resourceful leadership: how directors of children's services improve outcomes in safeguarding

## Summary report

**Resource**

## This targeted report has been published alongside a longer report, Resourceful leadership: how directors of children's services improve outcomes for children.

Leading for Outcomes puts the concept of resourcefulness at the heart of good leadership of children's services.

As illustrated in figure 1, 'resourcefulness' is the ability to:

— assess and widen one's resource base

— select and apply the best mix of resources to address the type of challenge faced.

The concept of a resourceful leader is helpful in thinking about the ways directors of children's services (DCSs) are able to:

— assess their situation, now and in the future

— actively seek to inform and shape the context they operate in to promote the interests of children and young people

— select a range of responses, drawing on both themselves and others as resources

— apply a response and see it through

Resourceful leadership defines eight core behaviours of resourcefulness. For the safeguarding theme, the study was able to identify the following resourceful behaviours:

— the ability to collaborate, create and sustain commitment across the system by encouraging strong and supportive relationships within the senior leadership team (SLT) and by developing shared safeguarding strategies and priorities to ensure collective responsibility for safeguarding standards

— focusing on results and outcomes in safeguarding and child protection by creating strategies to improve outcomes in the long term
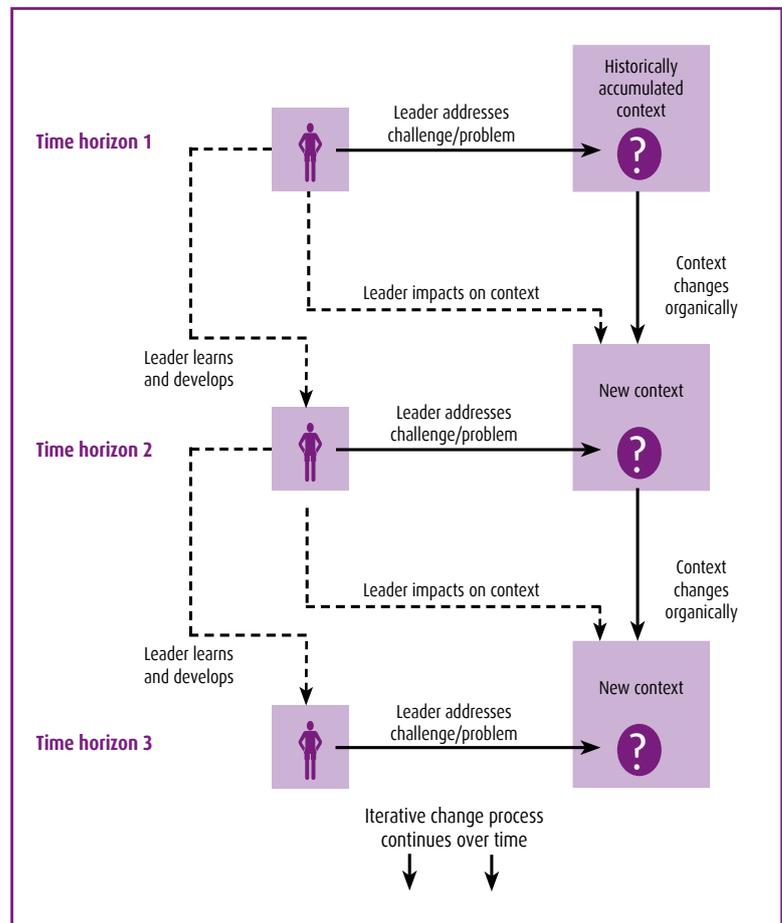


Figure 1 The dynamic relationship between leader and context over time

and taking measures to ensure data quality and performance

— the ability to be open to possibilities by proactively engaging in the task to find efficiencies through identifying a number of options that reduce costs while maintaining the focus on outcomes

— openness to possibilities by proactively engaging with the policy reforms required by central government, and by thinking innovatively about alternative models of delivery such as outsourcing or greater use of commissioning

1. These are: openness to possibilities; the ability to collaborate; demonstration of belief in their team and people; personal resilience and tenacity; the ability to create and sustain commitment across a system; displaying a focus on results and outcomes; the ability to simplify; and the ability to learn continuously.

# Evidence of effective practice

C4EO has produced a directors' summary that includes examples of effective practice in improving outcomes in safeguarding. The summary is based on international research and validated local practice and can be found at: http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/safeguarding/files/safeguarding_directors_summary_final.pdf

This report seeks to build on the current evidence base by:

— identifying the leadership characteristics of directors of children's services and their SLTs that impact on outcomes in safeguarding and child protection

— strengthening the body of knowledge on leadership and its impact on safeguarding and child protection outcomes

— using this knowledge base to offer practical support to professionals in services for children

## Leading collaboratively and creating and sustaining commitment across the system in safeguarding

Leaders in the sample frequently noted that one way to maintain commitment to safeguarding the welfare of children was by making the issue "everyone's concern". The majority of leaders demonstrated that creating shared priorities, strategies and working practices was integral in developing effective collaborative working in safeguarding and child protection. This approach was used across the SLT, with partners, such as schools, health and the police, and at the front line. Examples 1 to 3 illustrate approaches adopted to achieve this in three local authorities.

Specific tools were cited as being especially effective in sharing accountability and responsibility, for example:

— creating the expectation that key team members would develop shared safeguarding objectives

— encouraging joint safeguarding training as a method of building connections across different departments to help work on outcomes. Leaders in some authorities were managing this through multi-agency safeguarding training led by the local safeguarding board.

— encouraging 'vertical' as well as 'horizontal' integration. For example, making sure that leadership decisions are informed by practice and evidence leveraged from the front line.

### Example 1: Forming a cohesive SLT

Communication and supportiveness are very important in safeguarding. One borough introduced a monthly team health check across SLT level. This simple measure was used to monitor morale and draw attention to areas of risk. The SLT also organised regular away days to develop working strategies and improve openness so that "any issue can be brought to the table". An assistant director noted that "there are good skills across the team. There is no silo working in the directorate." This progress was reflected in a recent LAC inspection.

### Example 2: Collaboration across the SLT

Leaders in several authorities encouraged collective responsibility within the SLT on looked after children (LAC) priorities. For example, one assistant director for inclusion co-chaired the LAC steering groups with the assistant director for family and social care, which helped to identify tensions and issues and provided internal quality assurance within the SLT. This collaborative approach helped identify opportunities for improvements on outcomes in safeguarding.

### Example 3: Co-location as a means to develop collaboration and commitment across the authority

In one local authority, leaders were planning to co-locate children's services and form integrated teams that would be situated in community-based offices. This would enable teams to provide safeguarding services which would give responsive support on local cases, establishing a systematic approach and clearer systems for users to access.

> "We learn from regular team meetings and practice workshops...I'm not precious – strategy is no good without understanding front line experience."
>
> Assistant director of children's services

## Focusing on results and outcomes in safeguarding

Some leaders in the sample noted that short-term pressures to improve outcomes may make longer-term changes to safeguarding processes more challenging to prioritise. Despite this, two actions by leaders to lead long term change came across strongly:

— creating strategy to improve work in ensuring the safety of children and young people

— ensuring quality and performance

1. Creating strategy to improve work in ensuring the safety of children and young people

All leaders in this sample described approaches they took to improve safeguarding outcomes for children. Working with front line workers to identify practical approaches for doing so was an important element of this.

Leaders used practice workshops, case reviews and joint training as tools to facilitate bottom-up communication of issues and an iterative feedback loop between leaders and practitioners. This helped leaders to understand worker and user needs more clearly and develop a 'road map', or strategic plan, for service provision. Leaders demonstrated that clear communication of this strategy with front line workers was a powerful tool in leading others to focus on improving outcomes.

> "I engaged with a lot of front line staff in safeguarding and got a tremendous amount of feedback about the 'team around the child' and what should be the right threshold, etc. This has resulted in changes in practice."
>
> Director of children's services

2. Ensuring quality and performance

Example 4 describes how leaders in one local authority introduced a monthly social work forum to promote better links with front line staff. To ensure a long-term focus on outcomes and results, leaders monitored the performance of data systems and the quality of data produced to make sure that

### Example 4: Linking front line approach with strategy

Leaders in one authority felt that workers and leaders in safeguarding required a more aligned strategy. To address this, they introduced a monthly social work forum in which practitioners met to advise the DCS and Assistant Directors (ADs) about where resources could be better allocated. In conjunction, leaders wanted to ensure that the SLT better understood practitioners' work and challenges. Consequently, they introduced bi-monthly data audits and times to walk the floor to talk to practitioners and understand practice better. This two way process has brought about changes in strategy development as leaders are more aware of front line challenges and practitioners concerns are better addressed.

strategy was being implemented effectively and that outcomes were being improved as a result.

For example, some leaders reported that data on safeguarding did not necessarily map to the quality of outcomes, but was more useful to gauge the effectiveness of operational process. Consequently, leaders took measures to address data quality through implementing better systems for collection and analysis. Examples 5 and 6 (overleaf) describe the approaches adopted in two local authorities. Additionally, many leaders in the sample commented on systemic changes that were made to ensure data quality and improve communication with the front line. Leaders often used data "to have conversations with front line staff" so that they could understand outcomes better, rather than using data as a measure of outcomes.

## Openness to possibilities: leading through funding changes

With the challenge of in-year budget reductions and the continuing need to find savings over the years to come, leaders are looking at ways to improve service at lower cost. Four approaches were taken by leaders in the sample:

— seeing reductions as an opportunity to reshape safeguarding services

— delivering efficiency as well as reform

— demonstrating transparency across the authority

— increasing inter-professional working

### Example 5: Changing systems to improve quality and performance

One AD introduced an internal Quality Assurance as an early warning system in safeguarding. On the front of each case file was a list of simple questions and space for practitioner comment. This audit tool centralised the data on each case and enabled easier comparison between cases. The AD gained better access to information through this, and was better placed to investigate individual cases. Additionally, best practice was more easily identified and used to inform work on new cases.

### Example 6: Improving data quality

In another authority, a joint area review four years ago revealed that the quality audits did not provide much useful data. In response, the leadership team started to create better channels of communication with front line workers. For example, workers could complete a section in the quality assurance form for LAC to give feedback on the issues affecting their service area, and these reports from the front line were discussed in monthly SLT meetings. The dialogue between leaders and the front line has led to improvements in data. This system had been running for two years at the time of research and was seen to be very helpful.

### An opportunity to reshape safeguarding services

Current and future funding reductions will lead to changes in how many children's services are delivered. Despite some reservations that service quality would suffer, many leaders viewed funding challenges as an opportunity to undergo system reform and deliver more effective and efficient safeguarding services. As one leader noted, "complete reorganisation with more integration" will be needed to provide services at a lower cost.

### Delivering efficiency as well as reform

Budgeting skills and a "good eye on finance" were noted as fundamental to effective leadership through funding changes. Leaders have also been looking to make efficiencies in the way that safeguarding services are supported. While recognising the sensitive nature of some safeguarding cases, leaders have nevertheless identified scope for savings and looked to develop plans to share some back-office functions with other services.

### Transparency across the authority

Transparency and openness were considered to be vital when planning for reductions. Leaders in some authorities were consequently looking beyond safeguarding, and even beyond children's services, in order to take into account the entire council and external partnerships when addressing budget cuts.

> "In this division, we meet every six weeks and have discussed the impact of budget cuts. We're very pragmatic as a management team, and work in a very transparent and open way. It's not about decisions behind closed doors."
>
> Head of policy, planning, review & information

### Inter-professional working

Leaders in all authorities have been seeking to identify ways to improve outcomes and efficiency in challenging financial conditions through better inter-professional working. Examples of this include implementing new inter-professional working practices which drive efficiencies and adopting joint safeguarding approaches. Some leaders, particularly in London boroughs, have begun resource sharing, sometimes with neighbouring boroughs (example 7).

### Example 7: Pooling resources to support the wider community

Leaders in one local authority have encouraged broader participation in the decision-making process in safeguarding for some time as this broadens the number of colleagues who consider safeguarding to be a priority concern in their job. This approach has been modelled as a 'mini local strategic partnership' (LSP). This approach has previously led to success in the alignment of safeguarding budgets with health. Given budget reductions, however, there is a view to pool more budgets in future. Additionally, the 'locality agenda' in this mini-LSP has helped to ensure budget constraints have been considered from a whole service perspective, not just schools or social care.

# Implications: questions for consideration

In light of these findings, we recommend that DCSs and their SLTs review their individual effectiveness and their organisational outcomes by addressing these questions for action:

— Leading collaboratively and creating and sustaining commitment

— What are you doing to ensure good working practices are embedded through children's services and partners?

— Who are the key players and how can you influence and work with them?

— How do you ensure that you build commitment to shared objectives with your team? The front line? Partners?

## Focusing on results and outcomes

— How confident are you that you are drawing on all the available evidence to inform decisions and that you are gathering evidence from all relevant stakeholders?

— How confident are you that communication channels are effective within teams and between teams?

— Do you have the right systems in place to ensure that data is good quality and can be used to measure performance?

## Openness to possibilities

— Have you built strong working relationships and practices which enable you to consider a number of solutions to a given problem? How well do you work with colleagues and partners to find innovative solutions?

— Do you have the right resources in place to deliver effective work on outcomes now and in the future? What could be done to develop and improve these resources or use them differently?

— Do you have a clear view of the priorities which are most important and cannot be compromised? What work are you doing now to ensure that these priorities are protected? How have you communicated these priorities across children's services and partners?

— Have you defined and agreed priorities in this area with corporate, political and children's services colleagues for the next month? Six months? Year? Longer term?

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