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The evaluation of arrangements for effective operation of the new Local Safeguarding Children Boards in England - Brief

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Research Brief

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THE EVALUATION OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE OPERATION OF THE NEW LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARDS IN ENGLAND

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Introduction and Background

Both the statutory inquiry into the tragic death of Victoria Climbié (2003) and the first joint Chief Inspectors' Report on Safeguarding (Chief Inspector of Social Services et al., 2002) emphasise the importance of effective joint working between agencies and professionals to safeguard children from harm and to promote their welfare. Subsequent policy developments, underpinned by the Children Act 2004, are intended to ensure an integrated approach to service provision and that children achieve their potential in terms of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being (HM Government, 2004). *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2006: p.10) identifies one of the most important developments in this context as the establishment of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs). The Boards put former Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) on a statutory footing. Research had found that ACPCs' lack of statutory power had limited their effectiveness (Chief Inspector of Social Services et al., 2002). A series of other weaknesses were also identified including: variations in levels of representation and membership, structure and practice, poor leadership and insufficient resources (Chief Inspector of Social Services et al., 2002; Horwath and Glennie, 1999; Narducci, 2003; Ward et al., 2004).

Aims of the Study

The overall goal of the study was to examine whether the new structures and processes established by LSCBs have overcome identified weaknesses of ACPCs and promoted inter-agency co-operation. The aims and objectives were to examine and assess:

- if LSCBs are fulfilling their core functions to safeguard and promote the welfare of children;
- the working practices put in place and their effectiveness in securing effective operation of the LSCB functions and ensuring that all member organisations are effectively engaged;
- how LSCBs manage and evaluate their role in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and the effectiveness of lines of accountability;
- how LSCB partners transfer knowledge and information between member organisations;
- how LSCBs work alongside other local strategic bodies and partnerships;
- if the new systems and arrangements are 'fit for purpose' and whether they safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the local area;
- how far the new LSCB arrangements are influencing and improving frontline practice; and
- the estimated costs of the new LSCB arrangements.

department for children, schools and families

Key Findings

- LSCBs have addressed a number of weaknesses of ACPCs. Across a range of conditions of effectiveness to operate measures LSCBs in Case Study areas were performing at 65 per cent effectiveness.
- LSCBs that have been able to determine their main priorities have been realistic about what is feasible, have maintained focus and have been more effective than those that have been overly ambitious and opted for a very broad remit (in the context of the resources available to them).
- Professionals at the strategic and operational levels are embracing the notion that safeguarding children is a shared responsibility, rather than one confined to Children's Social Care. However, there were differences of opinion as to whether LSCBs should be embracing the wider safeguarding agenda or concentrating their efforts more narrowly on protecting children from harm.
- Local Authorities have struggled to establish accountability mechanisms, especially for Chairs. Governance arrangements in general remain weak.
- LSCB Chairs have provided strong leadership and broad membership and agency representation on Boards has been secured. Independent Chairs have struggled to be active in the wide strategic framework within local areas.
- Demarcation of roles and responsibilities between the Board and Children's Trust have not always been as clear as they should be.
- Representatives on LSCB Boards are largely of sufficient seniority to speak for their organisation with authority, commit their organisation on policy and practice matters and hold their organisation to account, although in some areas securing the right levels of seniority still needs to be addressed.
- Securing appropriate levels of participation by Board Members in LSCB meetings remains a challenge. Changes in agency representation on the Board and the lack of continuity of Board membership can make it difficult to maintain a shared vision and to sustain progress and development. It can also limit the establishment of relationships and trust, effective networking and operation.
- The size of the LSCB and the time and resources available to support the work of LSCBs are influential; small Boards lack enough members to be able to invest enough time to meet the LSCB role and remit, while large Boards become unwieldy and impersonal. The most effective size would seem to be between 20 and 25 members.
- LSCBs have struggled to fulfil all their functions. The time and resources required to undertake Serious Case Reviews, in particular, has inhibited capacity to move forward and fulfil other responsibilities.
- Effective communication channels between the LSCB and partner agencies are essential. Findings reveal, however, that generally these links and mechanisms, to ensure the effective dissemination of information to inform operational practice, were relatively weak.
- LSCBs are helping progress inter-agency work but developments in this respect have also been influenced by wider changes, such as the establishment of Children's Trusts and implementation of the Common Assessment Framework.
- Progress has been made in relation to inter-agency communication and the development of a shared language across agencies although a number of challenges remain.
- Substantial variations existed in terms of the resources that LSCBs receive from partner agencies. The Local Authority is the main provider with health (and to a lesser extent, the Police) making a substantial contribution. Other agencies contributed finances and/or in kind but the level of these contributions was small in comparison to the main agencies.
- For LSCBs to function effectively they need agencies to contribute resources to pay for support staff and training (among other things). They also rely on in-kind contributions and the release of staff to attend meetings and to engage in the activities of the LSCB. The combined cost of these contributions are not insubstantial, ranging from £136,494 to

£472,658. This does not include costs associated with Serious Case Reviews or Child Death Processes.

- Annual estimated costs associated with attendance at subgroups (excluding Serious Case Review and Child Death Processes) ranged from £20,272 to £135,776.
- In the absence of a funding formula Boards spent considerable time negotiating and securing contributions towards the operation of LSCBs and there were considerable variations in the resources each had available.
- Findings suggest that work to address public understanding of the work of LSCBs is weak and has been inhibited by lack of resources.
- Engagement and consultation with children and young people is underdeveloped; although they may be informed about the work of the Boards it is unusual for them to be actively involved or for their views and opinions to influence LSCB business and priorities.

Methodology

A mixed method approach was adopted, including a national survey and mapping exercise of all LSCBs in England and in-depth case study work in six areas, including:

- face-to-face interviews with six LSCB Chairs and Business Managers and five[1] interviews with the Directors of Children's Services in each area;
- 49 telephone interviews with Board Members, these included partners from Health, Social Work, Education, Youth Justice, Police, Early Years and the Voluntary Sector;
- 132 telephone interviews with frontline professionals (holding both managerial and non-managerial responsibilities) with similar professional backgrounds as the Board Members;
- content and thematic analysis of the minutes of Board meetings;
- Social Network Analysis (SNA) was piloted in two case study areas, providing detailed micro information on practice and effectiveness. SNA facilitated examination of the relationships between individuals and groups within the LSCB structure in order to gain an insight into how the LSCBs were functioning; and
- a detailed analysis of costing of LSCB meetings was conducted in two of the case study areas.

Measuring Effectiveness

The strategy adopted to evaluate the effectiveness of LSCBs for the current study was to draw upon existing evidence about what makes strategic partnerships effective (Ward et al., 2004; Percy-Smith 2006, Horwath and Morrison, 2007, Warmington et al., 2004). In the context of LSCBs there are two major sources of evidence:

1. Assessing LSCBs in comparison to the body of literature on the effectiveness of ACPCs. The weaknesses of ACPCs are well documented and evidenced – do the new arrangements address them?
2. Assessing LSCBs' operation against a broader literature on strategic partnerships' working and the delivery of Children's Services.

Thirteen key factors were identified that need to be present for the effective operation of LSCBs. These are outlined in Table 1, below. The conceptual framework and factors used to assess conditions needed for the effective operation of LSCBs are underpinned by findings from a range of studies including *Safeguarding Children: A Scoping Study of Research in Three Areas* (Ward et al., 2004). The latter was commissioned by the Department of Health to provide a summary of the current knowledge base on safeguarding children, including examination of the literature on inter-agency working. While factors 1-12 in Table 1 are all informed by a body of literature, judgments concerning the final factor (13, professional practice) are based upon the

[1] In one area the Chair is the Director of Children's Services

research team's assessment of frontline professionals' knowledge of their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding children.

Effectiveness across the Case Studies

Similarities and differences in the effectiveness of each of the case study LSCBs against key indicators of conditions needed for effectiveness are explored further below. As a way of capturing these issues we have produced a table with each area being assessed against the 13 indicators. A three point scoring system was adopted:

1 = clear evidence of challenges in operating effectively.
2 = evidence of adequate operation.
3 = clear evidence of effective operation.

Table 1 Conditions for Effective Operation table including scores of six LSCBs

	Effectiveness Factor	Effectiveness Indicator	Area One	Area Two	Area Three	Area Four	Area Five	Area Six	Total (18)
1	Clarity of governance arrangements.	Clear lines of accountability for the Chair and Board.	2	1	2	2	1	2	10
2	Clarity of governance arrangements – management.	Clear management structures for the Chair and the Board.	2	1	2	2	1	2	10
3	Strong leadership.	Skilled Chair with authority who is able to keep partnership focused on core tasks.	3	2	3	3	2	3	16
4	Clear priorities and focus of the work.	LSCB have clearly defined aims and objectives that are strategic in their focus on safeguarding.	3	2	2	2	1	2	12
5	Clear planning and reviewing of work.	There is good planning and reviewing of progress.	3	2	2	2	2	3	14
6	Maintaining clarity of purpose, values and vision.	There is a clear vision amongst Board members about purpose of the LSCB.	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
7	Adequately resourced infrastructure.	The LSCB is supported by a Business Manager and appropriate level of staff and resource to help it function effectively.	2	1	3	2	2	3	13
8	Importance of having the appropriate levels of seniority.	The Board has a good level of seniority amongst its membership – the right people are present who can act on the behalf of their agency.	2	1	3	2	2	2	12
9	Stability of Board membership.	Attendance and participation in the Board and subgroups are stable and active.	2	1	2	1	1	2	9
10	Strong links exist between the LSCB and operation.	Clear conduits exist between the LSCB and professional practice.	1	1	2	2	1	2	9
11	Understanding of roles and responsibilities by Board members.	Members of the Board understand their roles and responsibilities in the LSCB and act upon them.	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
12	Need for open communication and shared language between professionals.	Open communication both between and within agencies that facilitates co-ordinated response.	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
13	Professional Practice Frontline professionals fully understand their roles in safeguarding.	Frontline professionals have a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities in terms of safeguarding.	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
		Total	28 (39)	20 (39)	29 (39)	26 (39)	21 (39)	29 (39)	153 (234)

The judgements and subsequent scores attributed for each LSCB against each effectiveness measure were determined by the research team based upon analysis of all the data collected on each area. The total 'effectiveness score' across the six case study areas was 153 (see Table 1, above). Had every Board demonstrated clear evidence of effectiveness against all the measures a score of 234 would have been attained. Using this rationale , seen together, the LSCBs were performing at 65 per cent effectiveness. Across the case study areas scores on four effectiveness factors were low: stability of Board membership (9); strong links exist between the LSCB and operation (9); clarity of governance arrangements (10) and clarity of management structures (10). These areas need more attention if Boards are to become more effective.

There were no criteria against which every Board performed well or badly, as such the difficulties each area encountered varied between areas. Four LSCBs scored a '1' in at least one aspect of their work (i.e. there was evidence that they were experiencing particular challenges in operating effectively). Issues concerning links between the LSCB and operational practice were identified in Area One. In Area Four the continuity of Board membership posed a challenge. Areas Two and Five were facing a larger number of issues identified as influencing the effectiveness of their operation. Both these Areas were deemed to have struggled to establish clear governance arrangements and secure stability of membership. In Area Two interviewees also raised concerns about the size of the LSCB (small and 'inclusive') and the seniority of representatives. Positively, each area had secured effective leadership via the Chair (16). This also seems to facilitate the identification of clear priorities and focused activity (14). Area Three was found to be effective in this respect and all the other areas, with the exception of Area Five, were rated as adequate. Effective (two areas) or adequate (four areas) systems were also in place to plan and review work. LSCBs were also developing a clear sense of purpose and shared vision. There were four measures of effectiveness that every Board was rated as adequate against (indicators 6, 11, 12 and 13). These were areas in which there was scope for further development.

Chairing, Leadership and Accountability

Across the case study areas all of the LSCB Chairs were seen as being effective, having both the skills and the knowledge to take on a central role in leadership of the Boards. The core weakness related to the difficulties that Independent Chairs could have in becoming embedded and active in broader strategic networks and activities, which could have an impact on effectiveness. Under resourcing of the Independent Chair post, or lack of administrative support, could also pose difficulties and could leave Chairs with insufficient time to undertake wider strategic functions. In terms of accountability problems exist over separating out the functions of accountability from management. Evidence suggests that locating this with the DCS or the Children's Trust was not very effective. 'Mutual accountability' (being both accountable and 'scrutinised' by the Trust) is problematic, particularly in areas where many members of the LSCB also sit on the Trust. Confusion concerning the roles of Ofsted and GO in the Regions was also apparent. The duality of roles (governance and support) makes the proposed task of 'helping development' more difficult to achieve. Evidence from the research suggests that dialogue and positive responses to requests are critical if the relationships are to be improved.

Board Membership

Overall 68 Boards (55 per cent) have representation from all the statutory agencies outlined under section 3.58 of Working Together. Of the 56 Boards which have agencies missing, 45 were found to be missing only one statutory partner (France et al., 2009). In terms of membership of the main LSCB, evidence suggested that the larger the group the more difficult it was to manage the meeting and to ensure that business was being addressed. Making decisions, creating an inclusive meeting structure and networking opportunities are difficult in large groups. A small Board poses different difficulties, in terms of meeting statutory requirements on membership and

having a sufficient number of people to enable the Board to fulfil its roles and responsibilities.

It was identified that LSCBs could take one of two broad approaches to membership. One approach was to be exclusive and limit the number of people involved in the work of the LSCB and the other was to adopt a more inclusive approach and involve a larger number of people in the Board and subgroups. Both models have strengths and weaknesses. Exclusive models increase the chance of creating a shared understanding and focused programme of work, however, communication with wider groups and links with operational practice may be weak. Inclusive approaches with broader membership can draw upon the experience and expertise of people from a wider range of backgrounds, however, there is a risk of communication breakdown across the infrastructure of the Board and that a shared sense of vision and focus is lost.

Participation

It is important to consider not only LSCB membership, but also levels of active participation in meetings and work to support the LSCB. The way different agencies are organised can influence their participation and influence the effectiveness of LSCBs and the pace of developments. Firstly, sending substitute staff to meetings if a Board Member cannot attend can lead to delays in the decision-making process and undermine the collective identity of the Board and impact upon progress with work programmes. The practice of substitution was common in health and the police. Continuity of members is critical if the Boards are to be effective. Secondly, securing the appropriate involvement of agencies within large structures such as health and Children's Services poses an ongoing challenge to Boards.

While GPs and Head Teachers do not necessarily need to sit on the LSCB, mechanisms do need to be in place to obtain their views and to ensure that they are fulfilling their safeguarding responsibilities. The 'quasi autonomous' status of these professionals can raise challenges. Although representation of the Third Sector by national charities is good, challenges remain in terms of developing and maintaining links with smaller local organisations.

Establishing Effective Inter-agency Working Relationships

Professional cultures and practices are difficult to change but evidence suggests progress is being made and that LSCBs are making a contribution to improvements in inter-agency working. Trusting relationships support effective operation and are to be welcomed, however, it is also important that complacency does not set in and that agencies are sufficiently challenging of one another. Inter-agency training was considered in annual plans and is a core area of activity for LSCBs. The availability of training was limited by resources, although some areas were being innovative and creative in finding ways of funding inter-agency training. While frontline staff from across agencies were positive about its impact, concerns were raised that not enough single agency training was being undertaken and that for some agencies this was important as staff needed to know specific details about how to deal with concerns within their own agency. Gaps in training on neglect were also identified. Ongoing challenges concerning inter-agency working include: information sharing (especially Adult Services) and engagement with GPs.

Focus of LSCB Work

To be effective Boards need to set realistic plans and appropriate parameters around the activities they are undertaking. The role of the Chair as strategic leader is critical in helping the Board to determine the focus of the LSCB and maintain this as targeted work programmes are initiated. Board Members also need to be involved in developments and need to own the plans. LSCBs have been embracing the wider safeguarding agenda but a number of areas struggled because they have not had the capacity or resources to fulfil all of the LSCB functions. Those

areas that have been more successful are those that have concentrated on the 'core' business of child protection and then expanded into preventative activities as and when resources have permitted. The Baby Peter case has also served to influence the focus and balance of activity, with renewed emphasis being placed upon LSCBs' child protection functions. Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) can disrupt strategic planning and distance travelled as they are demanding in terms of time and resources.

Communication

Effective communication is critical if LSCBs are to be effective. This is reliant on good communication conduits and agreement about who is responsible for ensuring that messages reach the appropriate professionals. There is an expectation that Board Members will take a central role in communicating critical messages from the LSCB to their own agencies. However, some Board Members thought it was 'the Board' as a collective that should be responsible for this, rather than them as individuals. Others expressed uncertainty about how messages reached the appropriate professional groups within larger services. Communication to the wider public and to children and young people themselves was found to be underdeveloped. Although such activity may have many benefits (e.g. improving the image of social work) it was not a priority area, or one that Boards had invested substantial resource in. In a number of case study areas consultation had taken place but there was little evidence that it had shaped or greatly informed the work of the LSCB. This is illustrated by the fact that most Board Members were unaware of any such work. That said, a number of examples of good practice did exist and opportunities exist (for example, through closer engagement with Youth Parliament) to develop ways of more actively engaging young people in planning and monitoring LSCBs.

LSCB and the Impact on Professional Practice

Frontline professionals recognised the broad safeguarding agenda but identified that much of their work focused upon 'staying safe' and child protection rather than preventative work. Managers played an important role in keeping practitioners informed of developments and they also had a better understanding of the activities of the LSCBs. Frontline workers had a tendency to see the board as 'up in the ether' and detached from practice largely because the strategies developed at Board level in response to government legislation were considered to be beyond the realm of their practical engagement. Staff were better informed in areas that had developed practitioner groups. Evidence suggests that LSCBs have improved the information available to both frontline and managerial staff to support their work. However, there was a widespread view that the work itself has not changed but methods and processes had. LSCB had reinforced the importance of procedures, although staff tended to access information on a 'need to know' basis. One of the most positive developments seemed to have been that inter-agency working was becoming more embedded and information sharing had improved (although challenges still remain). LSCBs were contributing to developments, but changes were also seen to relate to wider policy and practice developments, including the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework.

Messages for Policy and Practice

Role and remit

- The most effective LSCB case studies had been realistic about what they were able to achieve and had focused upon the core business of ensuring that work to protect children was properly co-ordinated and effective before seeking to develop their preventative work.
- Without adequate resources it is not viable for Boards to effectively fulfil all their functions. The balance that LSCBs strike in this respect should inform decisions concerning membership and agency representation on the Boards.

Independent Chairs, leadership and accountability

- The Chief Executive's Office and Lead Members, through scrutiny committees, should be more central to the governance process to ensure that the Chair and the Board are held to account.
- LSCBs need to clarify governance arrangements and separate out accountability from management.
- Consideration needs to be given to mechanisms to ensure that Independent Chairs are linked into local networks and structures.
- The authority of the Chair and the LSCB need to be acknowledged and respected by agencies.
- The implications of non-compliance with Board recommendations should be clarified and systems should be put in place to support the resolution of differences of opinion.

Size and membership of the LSCB

- In determining the appropriate membership of the LSCB it is worthwhile considering both seniority and the specialist knowledge and expertise that individuals may bring.
- Continuity of Board membership needs to be addressed.
- It is important to clarify Board Members' roles and responsibilities and the distinction between 'representing the agency' versus 'representing the Board'. How this is achieved needs to be considered.
- Regular and consistent attendance at meetings is necessary to take forward the LSCB agenda. Increased active participation by Board Members and those on subgroups is required.

Communication between the LSCB and agencies

- Arrangements in respect of communication between LSCBs and agencies need to be clarified and strengthened.
- Information exchange in large organisations is challenging. There was limited knowledge about the extent to which information reached the appropriate personnel to influence policy and practice and effect change. This needs attention.
- Forums to engage with operational staff and ensure that their experiences inform strategic priorities and that the work of the Board influences practice are critical. Communication with GPs, schools and the third sector are a challenge and strategies to strengthen links with these groups are needed.

Communication to the general public and children and young people

- This area of work in LSCBs is currently underdeveloped. Work to improve public understandings of the work of LSCBs is weak and under resourced.
- LSCBs need to develop opportunities for children and young people to be more involved in the work of LSCBs.
- There is scope for the LSCB to undertake activities aimed at counteracting the negative portrayal of the social work profession and raising public awareness of the role and contribution that Children's Social Care and other agencies play in improving outcomes for children and families.

Training and support

- LSCB Independent Chairs and Business Managers would benefit from improved access to training and support to fulfil their responsibilities.
- Training for Board Members of their roles and responsibilities, and the operation of the LSCB, both at induction stage and on an ongoing basis would be valuable.

- It would be valuable to consider professional development opportunities and career pathways for LSCB Business Managers.
- Frontline staff identify that inter-agency training should not be at the expense of single-agency training, which is also important.
- The role of Government Offices of the Regions needs further clarification.
- LSCBs would benefit from advice and guidance about how to judge the impact that they are having upon the effectiveness of their work.

Resources

- Without adequate funding and the release of staff to attend meetings and undertake activities to take forward work, LSCBs are unable to operate effectively.
- Chairs, Business Managers and Board Members indicated that a funding formula would assist them. LSCBs are vulnerable to funding cuts which would limit their capacity to fulfil their responsibilities.

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Additional Information

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