

Report summary

High expectations, high support and high challenge

Protecting children more effectively through better support for front-line social work practice

Front-line social workers play a key role in protecting children and young people from harm. They assess whether children are suffering or are likely to suffer significant harm and take the lead role in relation to multi-agency child protection plans that prevent children suffering harm or harm reoccurring in the future. This report explores how senior managers in 14 local authorities successfully implemented a range of strategies to better support their front-line staff working in child protection and asks whether there is a demonstrable link between better support for staff at the front line and better outcomes for the children and young people they serve.

Key findings

- Where social workers were well supported, outcomes for the children subject to child protection plans improved in a number of aspects. Children became safer, healthier, less anxious, happier, more able to learn and more effectively supported by their wider families.
- Receiving effective support enabled front-line staff to have a greater clarity of purpose and to more accurately assess the quality of parenting. They felt contained and safe and thus better able to identify and manage risk. They were more confident in the 'rightness' of their decisions which increased their motivation to engage families and to recognise parents' strengths.
- Effective support depended on the creation of organisational cultures that were characterised by high expectations, high support and high challenge.
- Local authorities that supported social workers effectively shared a number of common characteristics: in particular the emphasis on a 'no blame' approach in the context of mutual ownership and responsibility in managing risks, as well as a strong emphasis on professional and productive relationships.

- Accessible and visible senior managers played a significant role in developing and sustaining empowering cultures that facilitated the exercise of skilled professional responsibility.
- Strong and knowledgeable political and corporate support were vital to enable directors of children's services to develop supportive organisations.
- A number of features were shared across local authorities that supported their staff effectively:
 - recruitment was well planned, rigorous and forward looking; providing high levels of support and challenge at all stages of the social work career pathway was as important as financial reward in retaining staff
 - clearly defined standards and expectations were accompanied by systematic performance audits and evaluation of the quality of practice and supervision
 - regular and high-quality line management support and supervision were most effective when staff were helped to manage the emotional impact of the work and to critically reflect on practice
 - front-line staff were emotionally, intellectually and practically well supported by their teams; the cooperation this engendered benefited children by offering consistency and effective responses to crises
 - well timed and relevant learning and development improved the quality of practice
 - partner agencies offered support through their ownership of shared responsibility to identify and manage risks, their willingness to challenge and resolve differences of professional opinions and their active engagement in change-focused work.
- The most important form of support was provided informally and formally by line managers through their detailed understanding of work, reflective supervision, and their direct involvement with parents.
- Social workers considered that scrutiny and knowledgeable challenge were integral to their feeling supported and empowered to exercise their professional judgement.
- Front-line staff greatly valued the high level of mutual support provided by their team. This contributed significantly to their motivation and enjoyment of the work. Having team space was important to enable this support to flourish. Families benefited because teams managed crises collaboratively and provide continuity in a social worker's absence.
- Support for social workers at critical points in the life of a child protection plan was crucial, notably at the commencement of the plan; in making a decision to end a plan; or in enabling social workers to challenge parental non-engagement.

- Social workers were modest about their own contributions. Personal qualities such as respect for parents, persistence and creativity were critical factors in engendering positive change.
- The positive quality and nature of relationships between senior managers and diverse groups of front-line staff were also reflected in the quality of relationships between social workers, parents and children.
- Parents were included well in planning and decision-making. They recognised the crucial importance of committed and honest relationship building which enabled them to trust social workers and fully engage in child protection plans.
- Few case records did justice to the quality and impact of critical analysis that inspectors identified as taking place, or evidenced the impact of support on outcomes.
- The extent to which written plans and reviews of plans clearly identified desired outcomes and the changes that subsequently occurred was variable.
- Local authorities did not have systems in place to track and aggregate the impact of child protection plans.
- The effectiveness of support was measured through feedback from staff and by extrapolating from ongoing monitoring and auditing. Formal evaluation of the impact of support was complex and rarely undertaken.
- Creative, locally generated solutions were developed to identify additional resources, release time for social workers to work with children and families and to keep caseloads manageable. Sustaining and extending these improvements in the face of financial stringency is an ongoing challenge for all authorities.
- Responding to demand and creating manageable caseloads were priorities for all local authorities. Skilled team managers ensured the fair allocation of work. A flexible 'one authority' approach in which pressures and referrals were shared across teams was essential.

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