

Speech: Social care commentary: what do local authorities need to do to improve from inadequate

In this commentary, I want to share some of the things we see local authorities (LAs) across the country doing as they move away from inadequate – the ingredients for improving, if you will. I also want to celebrate the commitment and passion of leaders, managers and professionals in these areas by showing examples of what specific LAs have achieved.

The difference that these LAs make to the lives of children and families is really positive. Some LAs such as Rotherham, Doncaster and West Berkshire have recently moved from inadequate to good and they have all transformed the response to children in care, children in need and families in their areas.

Every LA's journey out of inadequacy is unique, but there are always some common themes. To discover what these themes or ingredients look like, we have spoken to inspectors, LAs and the Department for Education (DfE). During this research, we also found some challenges and barriers that LAs had on their journey to improvement. We were particularly struck by the resilience of leaders, managers and frontline staff.

Below, I will discuss these common themes we see across improving LAs in the hope that they will be useful for those of you also on an improvement journey.

Accepting the report's findings

One of the biggest initial barriers to improvement is denial. This can really delay an LA beginning to focus on improvement. West Berkshire accepted the findings in its report straight away and focused on how to make the improvements identified. There was ownership across the local authority and partnership for making those improvements. It was therefore able to begin developing and implementing a plan straight away. West Berkshire involved all staff at the earliest stage and created a shared sense of responsibility.

One director of children's services (DCS) described how you might have to accept that things may get worse before they get better, because staff may choose to leave if they do not like the changes that are taking place. It may take time to recruit social workers, but staying on track with the plan is critical.

Having vision and ambition

It is important for leaders to articulate and communicate a clear vision across the whole council and partnership. We saw LAs improving when effective visions and supporting plans were child focused. What was really striking was

the ambition of LAs spoken to. Their aim was not just to be no longer inadequate, but to at least aim for good, or even outstanding – for example, Doncaster Children’s Services Trust has a clear aim to become outstanding. All these LAs strived to deliver excellent services for children. This ambition was very effective in motivating and engaging staff and partners.

Knowing about frontline practice and children’s experiences and progress

LAs expressed the importance of ensuring that they had a clear understanding of why children’s services are inadequate. This understanding enables the improvement plan to focus on the right things and helps staff to prioritise accordingly. It is important not to have an initial knee-jerk reaction, because this may slow the improvement journey.

To understand the impact of actions on practice, it was critical that LAs developed an effective quality assurance system and ensured that they could access timely performance information. Auditing was a very important part of this.

For example, Rotherham has access to comprehensive and live performance information using a new electronic recording system and an online performance portal and dashboard. These systems ensure that the LA has immediate, effective oversight of frontline practice. A revised quality assurance framework and a ‘Beyond auditing’ tool give managers knowledge of the quality of practice.

Rotherham also has a team of auditors who are engaged with a programme of ‘deep dives’ across all social work teams and services. The ‘Beyond auditing’ approach involves the auditor working with allocated social workers and team managers to carry out audits and provide coaching. This is part of a reflective conversation to bring about immediate impact and change to address identified practice issues. It supports a strong culture of learning. Manchester also described the importance of ‘closing the loop’ when auditing and checking that the actions were completed.

Many LAs highlighted the challenge they face when electronic recording systems do not support social workers to do their jobs. Significant investment and time were often needed to get a new electronic recording system in place. However, some local authorities were better able to overcome these barriers and implement an effective electronic recording system in a timely way. The dilemma for some local authorities was about how this affects the pace of improvement, because in the long term this investment will support social workers but in the short term it may mean a drop in performance that cannot be fully mitigated.

Some LAs, such as Manchester, bought in performance clinics to better understand frontline practice and children’s experiences. These were chaired by the deputy director and attended by managers across services. They were effective in holding managers to account and in embedding an increased focus on quality.

Prioritising and organising your improvement journey

LAs stressed how important it was for a plan to be co-produced with, and therefore owned by, partners, social workers, managers and young people. Planning needs to be long term and actions measurable. Different improvements to parts of the system will take different amounts of time.

There needs to be a clear operating model that sets out:

- the LA's vision and values
- the LA's philosophy of social work
- the structure of teams
- how cases move through the system
- how social work practice will be carried out
- the provision of help, protection and care for children
- what thresholds are
- what services are expected to do and their effectiveness

When LAs have kept on track with their operating models over a long time, changes are sustained. Essex and Leeds are good examples of LAs that have kept on track with their operating models and enabled an effective service to be provided to children. LAs described the importance of not being taken off track through other events, such as serious case reviews, major investigations and increased demand for services.

It is important that the improvement plan is communicated to all staff. LAs have done this in different ways, such as newsletters, blogs and regular conferences. For example, Bromley produced a 'roadmap to excellence', which is an easy-to-read document for all staff.

Getting the governance right is also really important. The governance arrangements need to ensure that there is a golden thread linking governance to frontline practice. Leaders need a comprehensive understanding of practice and must ensure that the timeliness and impact of actions to improve services to children and their families are closely monitored. Improvements needed to be continually tested.

It was vital to all LAs that plans focused on getting the basics right. The first priorities were to focus on the things that could mean children were not protected, to ensure compliance and to have a clear methodology of how social work practice should be carried out. This led to a relentless focus on practice.

Desired improvements must also be manageable. For example, Somerset had a defined number of priorities for its first year of the plan, and then also for the second year. Setting yearly goals in this way meant that teams could easily focus on a small number of critical areas to improve the response to children. In Leicester's inspection report, we noted that 'changes made through the local authority's improvement plan have now become part of everyday practice.'

When organising improvements, LAs highlighted the importance of ensuring that each part of the service was resourced sufficiently. Under-resourcing in one team or service may cause blockages in the system, particularly at the front door. Some LAs stated that getting the front door right at the beginning of the improvement journey was critical. Other LAs reviewed the scope of their teams, for example expanding the role of the children in care team so that the social workers became engaged at the beginning of care proceedings. This led to social workers having a better understanding of the child's experiences and enabled children to have stability of social worker during and after proceedings.

The pace of change is important. The DCS for Bromley, an LA still on its improvement journey, says that their mantra is: 'every day lost is a day lost in the life of a child'.

Making it easier for social workers to practice

The focus on supporting social workers to do their role effectively was a major factor for LAs' improvements. They had different methods of doing this, but all engaged with social workers to find out what was important and what could support them better to do their role.

The key ingredient here was how the LA engaged its staff. For example, it worked well when managers regularly met and listened to staff and when staff held managers and leaders to account for agreeing actions. The best leaders were highly visible and understood the day-to-day experience of social workers. In response to listening to social workers and their managers, LAs took various actions such as improving car parking and office accommodation, and providing laptops and mobile phones. Cumbria shows that it values its social workers by hosting annual social work conferences. Staff are able to benefit from valuable learning and development opportunities. The conferences are attended not only by frontline staff, but also by the chief executive, DCS and the portfolio holder.

Improving LAs told us that they made sure they had even workloads across the system, manageable caseloads and effective management oversight. Somerset and Bromley, for example, introduced smaller teams and increased the number of managers so that managers had a smaller span of control to support more effective oversight and practice. This was important in removing barriers to social workers being able to carry out effective practice. It also reflects the importance of supervision in supporting social workers and improving practice.

The DCS for Essex explained the importance of 'holding the emotional challenge of the work, cognitive empathy, and providing the practice challenge about whether the work being undertaken with the family is effective and helping the family'. This creates a culture of support for the workforce.

In Cumbria, managers used DfE funding to develop a teaching partnership with Lancaster University. This supports recruitment and continuous professional development. The LA has focused on increasing the skills of experienced

workers, for example in offering a new postgraduate certificate in child protection.

Making social workers want to stay

The offer to social workers and the focus on recruitment and retention are essential.

There are a large number of ingredients to create workforce stability, most importantly:

- the physical environment that social workers work in
- providing them with good support
- arranging training opportunities and career development and progression
- creating a learning environment that includes regular good-quality supervision
- ensuring manageable caseloads
- providing the right tools for them to do their work.
- engaging staff in the ambition and vision for children's services

As part of their improvement journeys, LAs have increased staff stability, often through increasing the number of permanent posts and reducing staff turnover. Local authorities 'growing their own' social workers was seen as an important part of increasing the number of permanent staff.

In Rotherham, we noted:

Staff across early help and children's social care report positively on training, development and career progression opportunities. Investment in advanced practitioner posts and coaching and mentoring for all managers support their capacity to implement the reflective social work model across the service. This, combined with restorative practice, enables staff to help children and their families to understand what needs to change to improve children's outcomes.

It may take some LA areas considerable to time to create a permanent workforce. Some LAs have recognised this and worked to make agency staff part

of their workforce, engaging them in training and learning opportunities and the vision for children's services. This in turn supports greater stability and more consistent practice.

Getting the culture right

The way that LAs value their social workers was significant. Improving LAs celebrated their good practice. Social workers and managers were involved in defining what good looks like through developing practice standards. They were continuously engaged and communicated with.

The importance of social workers owning the improvement plan was seen as critical. LAs also valued appreciative inquiry and coaching and mentoring staff, creating a culture of learning from mistakes. In Doncaster, there has been a strong focus on the voice of the child. Leaders have used the development of a children's services trust to articulate how it is a champion for social work.

The links between culture, morale and building confidence in the workforce come across strongly in our inspections. For example, in Manchester we noted:

The vast majority of social workers were very positive about working for Manchester, and particularly mentioned the visible and supportive leadership and management. Social workers described a more positive and engaging culture and working environment since which gives them a greater sense of confidence.

It was important for improving LAs to change their culture to one of high support and high challenge. In other words, they created a learning culture and not a blame culture. Staff benefited from a shared sense of ownership and openness.

We saw more good examples of getting the culture right in our inspections. The DCS for West Berkshire regularly updates her staff through a blog, creating a culture of honesty and transparency. Cumbria focuses strongly on the voice of the child. The LA regularly uses feedback directly from children and staff to shape all service developments. For example, care leavers' own evaluation showed that services for children looked after have significantly improved when compared with previous years. In Leicester, we saw a 'radical transformation of culture, whereby staff feel safe working in an open and transparent environment'.

Making the most of the support on offer

LAs saw corporate ownership and good engagement with partners as critical for improvement. For example, Rotherham developed strong corporate ownership, well-cultivated partner relationships and increased financial investment. This enabled the service to be highly responsive to local needs. Rotherham managed its improvement while dealing with increased demand.

As well as good strategic engagement with partners to deliver a shared vision, training across agencies is also important. Shared training encourages a common language and helps support partner agencies in delivering improvements consistently. LAs recognised the importance of good communication with schools.

Cross-party political support was also important. Improving LAs tend to have good engagement from local politicians and good scrutiny arrangements, in which children's services are a priority.

LAs spoke about the support on offer through peer reviews, the Local Government Association (LGA), the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the DfE and other LAs. They also spoke about ensuring that they took control of what help they needed and drove its focus. The best help supported their improvement plan, offered challenge and enabled them to evaluate how effectively improvements had been made. They were outward-looking and able to use the available support to keep them focused on their improvement journey and not to be distracted.

LAs also found Ofsted's monitoring visits an important part of their improvement journey. They were most beneficial when the monitoring visits were linked to improvement plans. The focus of the visits should reflect the timescales for improvement in different parts of the plan. LAs described how a trusting relationship with the lead inspector was important and maximised learning. They particularly welcomed the discrete focus of monitoring visits.

Doing the right things for families

During their improvement journeys, LAs remained focused on doing the right things for families. It is important to keep a proportionate response to children and their families. When an LA is inadequate, there is the risk of staff over-intervening because of a lack of confidence.

Some LAs described having to challenge a culture of fear and risk aversion across the partnership. They built confidence so that the response to the needs and risks of children and their families became proportionate.

It is also important that LAs engage and support other agencies to manage risk and concerns appropriately, otherwise the demand on the front door and services may be a barrier to improvement.

Summary

In my last commentary for Ofsted, I wanted to recognise LAs' very significant achievements when moving up from inadequate. The resilience, commitment and ambition for children shown by staff at all levels are striking.

I hope that the examples above are useful to any LAs on their improvement journey. The examples show that even in the most challenging environments, improvements can both be made and sustained. It takes leaders, managers, staff, the LA as a whole, local politicians and partner agencies working together to do this. They must share an ambition for children and their

families and use external support effectively to deliver this ambition.

Leadership is critical in improving the quality of children's services. Leaders must have the qualities we outlined in our report [Effective leadership of children's services: joining the dots](#):

They are credible and highly visible, and inspired staff to perform well. They set high standards for workers and developed a culture which was supportive and challenging while acknowledging risk and the need for clear accountabilities.'

One DCS said: 'my focus is practice, practice and practice'. This focus is essential to create an environment where social work can flourish. Confident and skilled social workers make the biggest difference to the lives of children and their families through working directly with them.

I really do believe passionately in the messages that I have consistently given while being Director, Social Care at Ofsted. I have reiterated these below:

1. It can be done.
2. Leadership is critical.
3. Make leaders visible and engage all staff.
4. Get the culture right and create a learning culture of high support and high challenge.
5. Know what is happening in frontline practice.
6. No agency can do this by themselves – partnerships with other agencies are critical.
7. Have a relentless focus on practice.
8. Enable good relationships between social workers and families by prioritising a stable workforce.
9. Create an environment for social work to flourish.
10. Focus on the experiences and progress of children.
11. Respond to what children say. Concentrate on getting it right for children and their families.
12. Recognise the complexity of work with families.
13. Build on solid foundations and getting the basics right.

If you would like to go over my previous commentaries, all of which highlight these messages, the links are below: