Signatures of Risk for Children's Services

Extract adapted from '[Intervention or prevention? The leadership response to performance risk'](), (Staff College, 2013)

(with some additional suggestions for consideration in the context of 2021)

Large and diverse organisations, such as local authorities, can sometimes become the enemy of effective delivery at the frontline, when they ought to be powerful allies. Drawing on inspection evidence and the experience of authorities in intervention, the Children's Improvement Board identified a number of 'signatures of risk' as long ago as 2012, but which still provide a useful set of indicators today.

The signatures of risk can be placed into three broad categories:

A: The broader political and corporate climate

- Lack of political focus on safeguarding and care

- Turnover and change in senior leadership

- Service re-organisation combined with challenging budget reductions

- The assumption that performance standards are secure in an environment of service maintenance rather than development

- *Financial difficulties including Section 114 considerations and auditor concerns*

B: Leading with others

- Weak commitment from partners

- Poor workforce development and/or capacity

- Lack of a learning organisational culture

- *Inadequate sharing of concerns in relation to potential extremism (Islamic and Right Wing)*

C: Leading children's services

- Limited self-awareness and no external challenge

- Failing to listen to or accept front line feedback

- Inconsistent observation of practice

- Professional weakness in supervision and audit

- Lack of focus on the child's journey or voice of the child

- Not developing a culture of anticipation and early warning of issues.

- *Unstable staffing imbalance between agency and permanent staff*

- *Lack of grip on data to drive quality assurance and performance internal and external*

It is important to stress that these are all indicators that, by themselves, may not amount to a serious problem but which, combined, suggest that all may not in fact be well.

The first category of risks, labelled the broader political and corporate climate is about where services for children and young people sit in the list of corporate priorities and the kind of potentially damaging assumptions that are sometimes made about how well children's services can cope when asked to deliver quality outcomes with reduced resources, expertise or leadership. Local authorities that condone lengthy temporary arrangements, leave gaps in the staffing establishment, and expect vacancies to be covered without giving thought to the consequences, put themselves at risk. The current preference for stripping out layers of senior management, and creating chief officer posts that cover a huge span of responsibility, can potentially have the same impact. What is lost, crucially, is the ability to identify risk and anticipate problems before they become unmanageable. The danger is that authorities adopting this approach will become increasingly reactive, and find it difficult to provide effective leadership for the frontline. Authorities that view improvement as a goal rather than a habit, and are unable to maintain attention on key priorities or, even worse, view success as an invitation to reduce funding also put services at risk.

Leading with others groups together three signatures of risk which are concerned with the capacity of the organisation to effect cultural change. A key challenge for the DCS is that of providing the kind of leadership that does not rely on the power of their position, but on the authority that they bring to the role. The challenge of

collaborative leadership, of course, is that it relies on both parties being able to find common ground and accept shared responsibility. DCSs report some real difficulties in bringing others to the table, with serious consequences for their capacity to improve. Many of their most significant partners, in the NHS, for example, or the probation service, are now involved in large scale structural re-organisation themselves, as a consequence of which they have become inward looking and there is a view that whilst they may say the right things, they are less likely than they once were to follow up with appropriate action. Internal partners can also be intransigent, defensive or simply unresponsive. Where DCSs are entirely reliant on corporate provision for human resources, finance services, performance information and organisational development, and the service that is provided takes little account of the specific needs of the sector, there can be real barriers in the way of creating a learning organisation.

The final group of indicators, grouped as leading children's services, are all about risks that DCSs can more obviously address without needing to rely on anybody other than those who work for them directly. That, of course, makes them the test of a different kind of leadership. Authorities at risk are likely to be isolated, defensive, and unwilling to entertain new ideas or fresh approaches. They are not just closed to external challenge, but are unlikely to make best use of the intelligence that they might gather internally to understand themselves more fully. They are less likely to be creative about the role of the principal social worker, or to encourage professional feedback or to listen to the voices of children, young people and those that care for them. Where others see opportunity, they see only threat.

The way in which these signatures of risk have been grouped is not random. The list is organised according to the degree of control that can be exercised by the DCS and senior colleagues. Spend too much time managing the political and strategic agenda and you risk losing sight of what is happening on the frontline, but focus overmuch on creating the right professional culture, and you risk marginalising yourself and your department. The key to success lies in the way that DCSs reconcile corporate and service leadership, and the arrangements they make for distributing leadership throughout the organisation.