

Your first ten days as a lead member for children's services

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Introduction

The role of lead member for children's services gives you the opportunity to make an enormous difference to the lives of your youngest residents – but it also comes with significant responsibility. It's the only role for elected members that's defined in legislation, and it requires careful working with partners and across the council to keep children safe, happy and well while supporting them to achieve their full potential.

This can seem overwhelming at first. This guide is intended to help provide some structure to your first few days in office, and to cut through some of the initial 'noise', so that you can focus on what's important straight away, and what you need to be thinking about going forward. A checklist is included at the back to help you keep track of what needs to be done.

As the lead member for children's services you hold political accountability for all council children's services, including education and social care. The director of children's services carries the professional accountability.

It's your responsibility to set the council's vision for children and young people's services, to take a strategic view in setting local priorities and budgets, provide challenge and support to the director of children's services and other members of the senior management team as necessary. You will also facilitate and lead strategic partnerships.

You also have a responsibility to champion the voice of children and young people in all decision-making, including across all council services and in partnerships.

You should:

- be closely involved in strategic policy matters
- have a good understanding of the budget, including pressure points and future projections
- know about performance, quality and efficiency
- be able to judge the overall effectiveness of commissioning arrangements
- be visible to service users and staff; listening to children, young people, parents and carers in order to identify gaps in service or service improvements.

Getting organised

Your new role will require you to consider a lot of important information so dealing with administration at the start will help you to keep on track.

Be clear on your responsibilities

The Government publishes statutory guidance for the lead member for children's services and the director of children's services, which you should read as soon as possible. Search online for this or visit www.gov.uk/government/publications/directors-of-childrens-services-roles-and-responsibilities

Due to the scale of the lead member role, in some councils there will be a deputy lead member who may take particular areas to focus on. However the lead member still retains the overall statutory accountability for all children's services. Lead member responsibilities cover all of the following areas:

- children's social care, including:
 - looked-after children
 - child protection
 - children in need
 - adoption and fostering
- early education and childcare
- statutory education including alternative education provision
- special educational needs and disability (SEND) up to 25
- home to school transport
- youth justice

- youth services
- unaccompanied asylum seeking children
- children's health and wellbeing.

If day-to-day responsibilities are split between two or more portfolio holders, make sure that you are all clear on your responsibilities and are working towards a shared vision. You should also have agreed ways of working with your colleagues to ensure joined-up decision making; it is your responsibility as lead member to check that nothing 'falls through the gaps'.

Ensure you have agreed with the director of children's services who does what in relation to representation, visits, speeches and the media, particularly in response to any serious incident attracting media attention.

Agree with the chair of the relevant overview and scrutiny committee how you will work together, including how you will participate in reviews, how you will respond to recommendations, and how you will keep each other informed of priorities and work programmes.

Speak to your employer

If you are currently in work, speak to your employer as soon as possible after your appointment to let them know the impact the role might have. It will help to have this conversation early on so that you are both clear on what time out of the office is acceptable and what options are available to work flexibly if needed.

Meet your support staff

As a portfolio holder, you are likely to have support staff, for example a PA, policy officers or access to political group office staff. This will vary between councils, so find out what support is available to you and meet with these officers so that you know what you can expect from them – and they from you. Make sure any support staff know the best way to get in touch with you and how you like to work. Setting expectations and boundaries early will help to ensure a smooth working relationship later on.

Get important meetings in your diary

Key meetings should already be set up in your council calendar – for example cabinet and committee meetings, and full council. Set up regular meetings with your director of children's services and the senior officer team in a format (in person/phone calls/emails) and frequency (weekly/fortnightly) that suits you. Consider a written protocol to clarify expectations for these meetings.

You will also be expected to attend certain partnership meetings, which your support staff or director will be able to identify for you. These could include local children's safeguarding arrangements, health and wellbeing boards and schools forums.

Book onto training

The Local Government Association (LGA) offers a free Children's Leadership Essentials course several times a year. This aims to support lead members with the key challenges they face in the changing policy landscape and to develop leadership capacity, share learning and provide a valuable networking opportunity. You can book this at www.local.gov.uk/councillor-development

The lead member role can also receive a lot of media attention, particularly if there is a serious incident. Speak to your communications team about media training so that you are prepared in case you are called upon to speak with the media or give live interviews.

Legislation

The lead member for children's services and director of children's services are required by law to hold direct accountability for the effectiveness, availability and value for money of the local authority children's services. Statutory guidance on the role is highlighted in the previous section.

The functions of the lead member and director are set out in section 18(2) of the Children Act 2004. This includes responsibility for children and young people receiving education or children's social care services in their area and all children looked after by the local authority or in custody (regardless of where they are placed).

You have a responsibility, with the director for children's services, to:

- act as a corporate parent for looked after children (this responsibility extends to the whole council)
 - ensure fair access to a diverse supply of good schools
 - ensure access to high quality provision for children with SEND
 - provide alternative provision for children outside of mainstream education provision
 - provide suitable home to school transport arrangements
 - promote high quality early years provision
 - work with partners to provide services for children involved in the youth justice system
 - understand local need and secure the provision of services for children and young people to meet this need
 - secure access to sufficient educational and recreational leisure time activities
- promote children and young people's involvement in public decision making and promote participation in education and training.

Different parts of children's services work to different pieces of legislation and statutory guidance. Your director of children's services and their teams will know these well and will be able to advise you on them when appropriate, for example when considering the direction of travel for that service.

People

You will not be able to meet with everyone immediately! Pace yourself, use your judgement and take advice from your director and any more experienced cabinet or committee colleagues as to which meetings need to take place first.

Your most important relationship will be with your **director and their team**, so they should be your priority. Meet with them as soon as possible, and ask for an overview of the key issues including successes and challenges. Ask for an organisational chart so that you know who to speak to for different services.

You'll also want to meet with the **chief executive** reasonably early on to get their view of the service. They will be a vital source of support going forward as part of the wider oversight of your portfolio, and can help to resolve differences of perspective about how corporate functions such as legal, finance and property are supporting children's services.

The LGA can put you in contact with a **lead member mentor** to help with problem solving and to provide support. Contact your principal adviser¹ if you'd like to take this up. You may also wish to speak with the previous lead member for children's services to find out more about their achievements, what challenges they faced and any advice they have.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states the importance of ensuring that **children and young people** are involved in the development and delivery of children's services. Find out what mechanisms your council has in place to engage with young people, for example the Children in Care Council and youth forums, and make plans to

meet with these groups and receive regular feedback.

The leadership role for the lead member and director is also to ensure effective **partnership working** with other public services including early years' providers, schools, the police, health, adult services, housing, voluntary sector, economic development and community safety. While you will need to meet with representatives of all of these over time, you should prioritise the chair of your local safeguarding arrangements and leads for health and the police, as these are key strategic safeguarding partners. Your director will be able to help you identify and prioritise other partners to meet with.

Ask to spend time with **frontline workers** to get a better understanding of what they do and what the challenges are. This will take quite a while so don't rush. It's important that you have time to translate what you learn on those visits into actions back at the council. Ask your staff to put meetings in your diary to give you time to get round each team over the course of your first six months to a year.

It will also be helpful to identify who are your eyes and ears in the **community** – foster carers, school governors and youth leaders, for example, who can give you an informed perspective on how things are going.

Meet with **the leader and/or mayor** to discuss their own aims and aspirations for children and young people in the area. This will help you to frame your own vision and establish a good working partnership from the beginning. Speaking to **scrutiny and corporate parenting** colleagues to work out how you want to work together will be useful; they will be able to provide a vital

¹ www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers

independent perspective, and you may be able to give them a steer on where they could most usefully support and inform your work. Going forward, have regular conversations with your leader and cabinet colleagues or fellow committee chairs, as well as scrutiny colleagues, both to keep them engaged in your portfolio and to look at how children and young people are being considered in wider plans. Potholes might spark more debate, but children's services can bust the budget when things go wrong.

Process and how things work

When you meet with the director of children's services, find out what structures are in place both within the council and externally to discuss children's issues. This can include things like regional adoption agencies and school improvement structures. As you spend time in the lead member role, consider whether these are functioning and aligned as they should be, and whether they give you a clear view of what is going on. Does everyone involved in these structures have a shared view of how things are operating?

You should be fully briefed and receive reports on any critical incidents affecting children's services, and have briefings and pre-meetings (where required) before key meetings. Make sure your support staff and the director of children's services know how you wish to receive this information and how they can reach you quickly if they need to.

It is helpful to know the basic steps of child protection, from referrals and assessments through to child protection plans and taking children into the care of the local authority. Go through this alongside relevant data with the director or another appropriate officer and later, have a frontline social worker talk you through it so that you understand it as it happens 'on the ground'. Fully understanding both the data and the process will give you a fuller picture and allow you to provide more effective and constructive challenge.

Ask your director to talk you through the local education landscape and the council's role in this. What is the council's relationship with local academies like? Are there enough spaces to meet demand and how is this being managed? Are there any issues with alternative provision or specialist SEND provision?

As you settle into the role, don't be afraid to get into the detail of how things are operating. Always bear in mind that professional boundaries and sensitivities do exist, so it's important that your scrutiny is reasonable, proportionate and coming from a place of supportive challenge. However, you are accountable for children's services at your council, so you need to know what is really happening in the organisation – rather than what your strategy says should be happening.

Information and statistics

You will need to have a good understanding of the departmental budget and where funds come from – ask to spend time with the director of children’s services and/or relevant members of the finance team to go through this and to understand why different budget decisions have been taken, where the pressure points are and what the projected spend is for the coming year.

You will come across a significant amount of statistics in your role. All of these will be useful at different points, but there are certain things that will be useful to know from the beginning and to keep a regular eye on:

- Average caseloads for social workers (how many children and families are social workers working with? How does this compare to what your council would like it to be?)
- How many children are looked-after by the council, how many are on child protection plans and how many are classified as children in need?
- Performance of local schools – how many are performing well and how many are inadequate?

You should read your latest Ofsted report as soon as possible along with any accompanying action plans and self-assessments.

Copies of council policies for each area in your portfolio will also be useful – you won’t have the chance to read all of these at once but they will help to inform your discussions as you meet each head of service.

Training

The LGA offers a significant amount of support in developing leadership and improving children’s services. Visit www.local.gov.uk/childrens-services-improvement for more information and to identify what you’d find most helpful.

The LGA also produces a range of documents to support lead members and their fellow councillors on specific issues, from corporate parenting to children’s health. These are all published at www.local.gov.uk/publications – search under ‘children and young people’.

Checklist

Get organised

- ✓ Speak to your employer.
- ✓ Clarify your needs and expectations with any support staff.
- ✓ Add key meetings to your diary.

Speak to your director of children's services

- ✓ Agree how often you will meet.
- ✓ Agree how you will receive updates between meetings where required, including for urgent situations.
- ✓ Clarify your responsibilities.
- ✓ Find out the strengths of the department, what the challenges are and what's being done about these.
- ✓ Understand the local landscape for children and young people – how effective are relevant partnerships, what is the relationship like with local schools, what are the key challenges facing young people?
- ✓ Go through your budget with the finance team and director of children's services.
- ✓ Arrange to sit down with a frontline social worker or relevant department lead to go through the child safeguarding process.
- ✓ Read your most recent Ofsted report and associated action plans and self-assessments.
- ✓ Book onto the LGA's children's leadership essentials course.
- ✓ Make contact with a peer mentor (via the LGA's principal advisers if needed).

Set up meetings in the future with:

- ✓ service managers
- ✓ frontline staff
- ✓ children, young people and families
- ✓ key partners.

Glossary

The following are terms you are likely to hear a lot in your role; a more detailed glossary about children in care in particular is available in our 'Corporate Parenting' resource pack.

Academy school

A state-funded school directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control. They are run by an academy trust and may have a sponsor, such as a business or university.

ADCS

Association of Directors of Children's Services, a membership organisation for directors of children's services and their leadership teams.

Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)

All services that work with children and young people experiencing emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties.

Cafcass

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service looks after the interests of children involved in family proceedings.

Care order

A court order approving the case for a child to be taken into care.

Clinical commissioning group (CCG)

These commission most hospital and community NHS services in their area, including mental health and learning disability services.

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) A process by which children are trafficked, exploited or coerced into committing crimes. County lines is a form of CCE.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE)

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

Children's home

A residential facility where groups of children are cared for by qualified workers.

Children in need

Under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, a child is classified as 'in need' if they are unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without support from the council, or if they are disabled. The council has a responsibility to provide services to safeguard and promote the welfare of these children.

County lines

A tactic used by groups or gangs to facilitate the selling of drugs in an area outside of the area they live, reducing their risk of detection. This usually involves the exploitation of young people or vulnerable adults.

Dedicated schools grant (DSG)

The DSG is ring-fenced funding from the Government to provide education locally. It is made up of the schools block, the early years block, the central schools services block and the high needs block.

EHCP (Education, Health and Care plan)

A plan for those between 0 and 25 in education who have additional needs. The plan coordinates a child's educational, health and social needs and sets out any additional support they may need.

Foster care

Foster care is a way for children to be cared for within a family setting when their own family is unable to care for them. It is considered temporary in that there is no legal split from the family (as with adoption), but can be long term where this is in the best interests of the child.

Free school

A school set up by an organisation or a group of individuals, funded by the government but not controlled by the local authority.

Free school meals (FSM)

Children whose parents receive certain benefits are eligible for free meals at school.

Home to school transport

Councils have duties to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport for children travelling to school, and to make transport arrangements for all eligible children.

Independent fostering agency (IFA)

IFAs provide fostering services to local authorities. They recruit, train and support their own foster carers who the council can then place a child with on payment of a fee. IFAs can be charities, not-for-profit or profit-making.

Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS)

ILACS is the current framework used by Ofsted to inspect children's services.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)

JSNAs identifies the current and future health needs of the local population to inform and guide commissioning of health, wellbeing and social care services within local authority areas.

Joint health and wellbeing strategy (JHWS)

The JHWS outlines how local partners will work to improve health in the local population and reduce health inequalities.

Kinship foster care

Kinship foster care is where a child is looked after by a relative or a friend, but the local authority still has legal responsibility for them.

Looked-after child (LAC)

A child in the care of the local authority. The abbreviation LAC is often used as short-hand but children in care have raised concerns about the connotations of this, so consider whether you can use 'CLA' (child looked-after) or similar instead.

Maintained school

A school that is funded via the council. These must follow the national curriculum and national teacher pay and conditions apply.

Modern slavery

Modern slavery encompasses slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking. A person is trafficked if they are brought to (or moved around) a country by others who threaten, frighten, hurt and force them to do work or other things they don't want to do.

Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)

A MASH is a single point of contact for safeguarding concerns in an area, bringing together partners such as the police and health with the council to consider safeguarding referrals.

No recourse to public funds (NRPF)

This refers to people who are subject to immigration control and have no entitlement to welfare benefits or public housing. This does not affect councils' responsibilities towards children.

Regional adoption agency (RAA)

Regional arrangements for providing adoption services, which can include councils working together and joining with voluntary adoption agencies.

Regional Improvement Alliance (RIA)

Regional partnerships between the LGA, ADCS and the Department for Education set up to promote improvement in children's services at a regional level.

Regional schools commissioner (RSC)

RSCs oversee academies and free schools. They are responsible for taking action where there is underperformance in these schools or by academy sponsors.

Schools forum

A local forum made up of representatives from schools, academies, nurseries and 16-19 provision. The forum must be consulted on changes to the local schools funding formula, and must agree how much of the DSG can be retained by the council for central services.

Section 47

Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 places children's services under a duty to investigate if they are informed that a child in their area:

- is subject of an Emergency Protection Order;
- is in police protection; or
- is suffering, or is likely to suffer significant harm.

They must then decide whether any action is needed to safeguard that child's welfare.

Secure children's home

Secure children's homes offer specialist care and intensive support in a secure setting to young people sentenced by the courts and to young people detained for their own welfare (for example, where children are at risk of child sexual exploitation, and likely to place themselves in risky situations). These are referred to as youth justice beds, and welfare beds respectively.

Solace

Solace is the representative body for Chief Executives and senior managers working in the public sector in the UK.

Special educational needs and disability (SEND)

A child or young person is considered to have SEND if they have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of mainstream educational facilities.

Special guardianship and SGOs

Special guardianship means that a child lives with carers who have parental responsibility for them until they turn 18, but legal ties with the parents are not cut as with adoption. The child is no longer the responsibility of the local authority, and is looked after under a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).

Troubled Families

This will usually have a different local name that your director of children's services can advise you of. It is a programme of targeted intervention for families with multiple problems, for example crime, anti-social behaviour, truancy, unemployment, mental health problems and domestic abuse.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)

The definition of an unaccompanied asylum seeking child is set out in the Immigration Rules as someone who:

- is under 18 years of age when the claim is submitted;
- is claiming in their own right; and
- is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so.

Virtual school head

All local authorities must have a virtual school head (VSH) in charge of promoting the educational achievement of the children looked-after by that authority. Their role is to know how the looked-after children are doing, and help school staff and social workers to find out about the extra needs of these children and any additional support available to them. VSHs also work with the children's services department and all schools in the area on initiatives to promote the education of children in care.

Voluntary aided school

The majority of voluntary aided schools are faith schools. They are maintained by the local authority, but a foundation or trust (usually a religious organisation) inputs a small proportion of the capital costs for the school and forms a majority on the governing body.

Youth offending team (YOT)

A YOT brings together the council with partners including the police, education, probation and health, and carries out the council's responsibilities for local youth crime prevention, supporting young people at the police station and in court, and supervising young people serving a community sentence.

Useful resources

Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the director of children's services and the lead member for children's services for local authorities

www.gov.uk/government/publications/directors-of-childrens-services-roles-and-responsibilities

LGA support for children's services improvement and leadership development

www.local.gov.uk/our-support/our-improvement-offer/childrens-services-improvement

LGA Bright Futures campaign – getting the best for children, young people and families

www.local.gov.uk/bright-futures

LGA Vision for Youth Services

www.local.gov.uk/youth-services-vision

Developing and sustaining an effective local SEND system

www.isospartnership.com/uploads/files/181108_LGA%20SEND_final%20report.pdf

LGA resource packs and guidance

Corporate parenting

www.local.gov.uk/corporate-parenting-resource-pack

Support for care leavers

www.local.gov.uk/support-care-leavers-resource-pack

Youth justice

www.local.gov.uk/youth-justice-resource-pack

Early education and childcare

www.local.gov.uk/early-education-and-childcare-resource-pack

Permanency

www.local.gov.uk/permanency-resource-pack

Don't be left in the dark: children and young people's mental health

www.local.gov.uk/dont-be-left-dark-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health

A Better Start: supporting child development in the early years

www.local.gov.uk/better-start-supporting-child-development-early-years

Enabling school improvement

www.local.gov.uk/enabling-school-improvement

Early help (due mid-2019)



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