



LORD LAMING PROGRESS REPORT ON SAFEGUARDING

SOLACE SUBMISSION

SOLACE is the professional association for 1700 senior staff in local government and those aspiring to senior office. We represent local government senior professionals, present and future.

The pace of your enquiry has not allowed full consultation with our membership. This submission draws on the experience of chief executives who have experience of managing in unitary authorities, those who have previous direct experience of managing “Social Services” operations and other senior voices.

We wish to address five aspects and in addition we outline our ambitions for change at the end.

1. The task

Decision-making about the rights of parents and the needs of children is, we submit, the most onerous of all local government responsibilities. However it is not the most debated; it is not easily understood; it is seen as the preserve of experts and it is still an area where the prevailing message is “do your best” rather than “get it right”.

Intervening in the lives of families where complicated emotions, aggressive or deceitful behaviour and an absence of reasonable expectations is the norm is inherently stressful to a degree unimaginable to most outsiders.

Social Work and its allied functions is the career of choice of well-motivated individuals. There is still a supply problem. Society’s attitude to perceived failure has a direct link to future likely supply.

The SOLACE view is that management at strategic, operational and case level has a very significant part to play in safe practice. From top to bottom, managers matter, have responsibilities and should be accountable for their work.

Chief Executives are the best paid most senior members of staff in councils. Notwithstanding the statutory role of other staff , now including Directors of Children’s Services, chief executives should accept their role in setting and securing high standards and hiring and where necessary firing expert staff.

In accepting these responsibilities we put in a plea for realism but not defeatism.



The current society acceptance is that all parents are allowed to bring up their children in their own way until they demonstrably fail. The likelihood is that this freedom will permit some parents to be reckless or wilful as to their children's safety. In this context, the state's intervention will from time to time be too late, too indecisive, too prone to optimism.

There is evidence that no other "fail safe" option – promoting wider, earlier, less generous intervention would be acceptable to society, or the courts.

We believe that political promises that exhort that "such deaths (or severe traumas) must never happen again" are irresponsible and serve to obscure a more fundamental debate about the fundamental rights of children and parents. In our view good people making good judgments in good systems can still not be enough to prevent some parents harming or killing their children.

Nor would a more interventionist system necessarily serve children's interests. Life away from a natural family only sometimes secures a very good outcome, particularly for older children.

2. The role of Management

SOLACE believes management matters. Such a belief can seem contentious if managers are belittled as "bureaucrats", "overheads" and "penpushers".

Managers are not there just to ensure compliance. Good management is creative, empowering and sensitive to the individual needs of front line staff and more junior managers, yet confident enough to set and secure high standards.

Contrary to some government guidance and other models, management is more than just a checklist of tasks to be completed or supervised.

Good management involves the management of morale and the creation of a working culture that allows truth to be spoken to power, especially where not all is going well. Management hierarchy is necessary in complex organisations but hierarchical structures have an inherent weakness in that they can discourage the speaking of truth because of the disparity in power. Senior management must empower more junior staff to believe that straight talking is part of the deal. Where managers don't do that, others will not want to be the messenger with bad news.

Structures for management organisation are fascinating but the evidence that some structures “work” better than others is absent and we do not believe that directing management structures by legislation has proved successful.

The Every Child Matters reforms, though benign and principled in intent, secured only a plainer definition of accountability. They did not secure greater talent, application or experience in the management lines. Indeed the appointment of a predominance of Directors of Children’s Services from an educational background arguably diluted the senior talent pool to be applied to safeguarding as a specialist knowledge area.

3. The role of inspection

Inspection has limitations. It focuses minds on defined measures of success. However it induces defensiveness; invites self delusions about competence and distracts staff .It has an important place but is not sufficient. A periodic MOT test catches badly maintained vehicles. It does not mean the vehicle will drive well or safely the rest of the year.

Performance indicators have been raised to an importance that they are unsuited to. Yet within local government, reputation calibrations turn on minute differences in PI performance.

Busy chief executives, with apparently more urgent tasks of political liaison and project delivery, will be likely to take false comfort from good PI figures.

Inspection and inspectorates need to be more humble, content to offer insights into what might be important to explore further rather than claiming to be definitive about quality.

Alongside inspection a culture of self and peer criticism needs to be encouraged, together with a sophisticated balance of checks and balances including political oversight and challenge.

4. Training

Local government is still characterised by a low level of skill acquisition and improvement. The introduction of three year degree training for social workers was a great advance but Social Work practitioners are not required to have continuous professional development to any degree worthy of the name. Relevant managers need not be trained in those things they challenge and support.

The efforts to empower employers to be more influential in training, particularly the higher education offer, are to be admired but are as yet immature.

Courses for specialisms in advanced social work, modernised again from 2007, are good but voluntary. There is no requirement for practitioners to complete courses in safeguarding or more complex areas of family dynamics.

Our observation is that expectations of the competence and credibility of key childcare staff are too variable and complacent.

It would be best if councils, indeed all local agencies, voluntarily raised their game to demand higher levels of regularly demonstrated competence but this implies a step change in unit costs which is currently unlikely.

5. Resources.

Many reports, including we submit, the last Laming Report on Victoria Climbié, dodge this issue of whether enough money is spent on Safeguarding.

We submit that very good public provision is expensive; that long term work with families can be criticised as rewarding failure; that value for money analysis in this area is illusive and that resource constraints in local government are real, onerous and likely to suppress imaginative, persistent, generous work with families and children.

Resources are not just about budget lines. Time and commitment generously and reliably given by individual practitioners and other agencies are essential. But situations where such contributions are unreliable or reckless must be challenged.

Ambitions for further change

SOLACE submits:

1. No further national prescription for structural change should be advanced, lest it be a distraction.
2. If Safeguarding is to remain a local government function then Councils be required to formally consider at budget-making the adequacy of their resource commitment.
3. DCSF should commission a costed model of work with families hardest to help, to illustrate the real costs and benefits of such public spending.



4. That the community leadership role of local councils to convene the local state to advance legitimate local ambitions be formally interpreted as the right to set and police standards of multi-agency practice. Departures from accepted standards must be escalated until eradicated.

5. That there should be encouragement for MORE localised ways of working – to test whether co –location of staff, joint visiting by different professionals, second opinion visits, more domiciliary visits by experts and different management styles (eg more self managed professional practices) can show worthwhile gains.

6. That training expectations be raised.

7. That the onerous nature of this work be regularly and publicly recognised by those responsible for opinion forming.

8. That Councils be encouraged to ensure a senior manager with appropriate experience of this area of high risk operational work, is positioned so as to have a duty to report to the Head of Paid Service and elected Members.

9 That to educate public understanding, that within the limits of confidentiality, each council is encouraged to publish an annual report on their safeguarding practice.

10. That Ministers are encouraged to facilitate public debate of the respective rights of parents and children and discouraged from pretending conflicts and dilemmas do not exist.

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