

# Child protection – a review of the literature on current systems and practice

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Produced by Research in Practice, as part of a wider project on improving the effectiveness of the child protection system, commissioned by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA) and supported by the NSPCC, Research in Practice and the University of Oxford.

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This research paper was produced as part of a wider project on improving the effectiveness of the child protection system, commissioned by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA) and supported by the NSPCC, Research in Practice and the University of Oxford. The project had five strands, all of which are published as separate research papers. An overview report, published by EIF and the LGA, brings together the key findings, lessons and recommendations from this wider programme of research.<sup>1</sup>

The research project overall seeks to identify:

- the evidence base for effective systems, interventions and practice in child protection and work with vulnerable children
- how local authorities engage with and use that evidence in designing local systems, commissioning interventions and supporting social work practice
- information about costs and benefits of specific interventions as they are implemented in practice
- an overview of demand for child protection services and the extent to which this demand is being met in local authorities across England.

This report seeks to answer the question:

*Where and how are local authorities doing things presented as good practice in published reports in relation to improving child protection systems and practice?*

The research question reflects the understanding that successful work with vulnerable children and families depends on multiple layers of activity:

- **practice:** practitioners who are skilled and confident in working with families to assess and meet children and young people's needs
- **interventions:** the availability of high quality services, underpinned by a strong theory of change, that are targeted at specific groups of children and young people
- **systems:** the provision of workforce support and challenge, performance monitoring and quality assurance, effective arrangements for co-operating with other agencies and offering consistency to children and families.

### Aims

This report aims to summarise publicly available information about current local authority activity that is presented as good practice or 'likely to be effective' in published reports. The findings of this report underpinned the development of the subsequent research, with five local authorities investigating the use of research evidence regarding 'what works' in local authority child protection systems, services and practice.

'Likely to be effective' is defined as systems, interventions or practice that appear to reflect key messages from the academic literature about the ingredients for

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<sup>1</sup> This paper and others in the series can be accessed via the EIF website, at <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/improving-the-effectiveness-of-the-child-protection-system-overview>

effective systems, interventions and practice, or examples presented as good practice in published reports. Predominantly, this means literature about social work systems and practice – though in reality, of course, effective child protection involves other professionals and services.

Examples included in the report should *not* be seen as endorsements of particular approaches as being effective – there is insufficient evidence to draw such conclusions; rather examples are provided to show the variety of approaches being used across the country.

## **Key findings**

Local authorities are responding to their local context to redesign systems and improve practice with vulnerable families. The review identified a range of approaches to systems and practice across local authorities in England:

- the use of assessment tools and frameworks to improve analysis of risks and needs
- the commissioning and delivery of a range of interventions and approaches to improve outcomes and reduce risks for children and families
- strategies to develop the knowledge and skills in the workforce and provide sufficient staff capacity to allow practitioners to use those skills
- the development of a clear organisational vision and culture to guide the delivery of services for vulnerable families by multiple agencies.

## **Scope**

The review of local authority activity includes systems, interventions and practice with children and young people who require a social care response, as defined by current legislation and guidance. This includes:

- children assessed to be in need of services due to risks to their health and development under section 17 of the *Children Act 1989*
- children assessed to be experiencing, or at risk of, significant harm and thus requiring a child protection plan under section 47 of the *Children Act 1989*
- children assessed to be at such significant risk that care proceedings are necessary, and for whom the local authority is going through the Public Law Outline (PLO) process.

The review does *not* cover local authority activity for children who do not meet the social care threshold (ie, those eligible for early help services) or children who are looked after away from home.

These parameters are not always well-defined in the existing literature regarding local authority activity in child protection.

## **Assessment and analysis: key findings**

In order to continuously improve assessment practice, local authorities have introduced assessment frameworks and tools. However, there are very few assessment tools that have been validated as effective for assessing needs of vulnerable children and families in the UK. Some local authorities are developing their own assessment tools based on their interpretation of research and practice wisdom.

Assessment tools are used for:

- general assessment, planning and review with vulnerable families
- to assess specific risks and needs, such as child sexual exploitation
- to determine eligibility for certain services or interventions
- to assess children's need for support at particular stages of the child protection system, such as at the point of reunification with their family on return from care.

### **Direct work and interventions: key findings**

Local authorities are using a range of approaches and interventions to work directly with vulnerable children and their families to reduce risk and improve outcomes. These include:

- *Parenting programmes*: Triple P, Webster-Stratton and Strengthening Families.
- *Therapeutic interventions for young people*: Multi-Systemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy and locally designed interventions with similar aims of resolving family conflict and managing behaviour.
- *Intensive work with parents*: Family Nurse Partnership; Intensive Family Intervention Projects; Family Drug and Alcohol Courts; and the Pause project.
- *Local approaches informed by an overarching theory of social work*: motivational interviewing, systemic social work units.
- *Family-led decision-making*: involving parents and members of the wider family in decision-making and planning for the safety of children, including Family Group Conferencing and similar models and Signs of Safety.
- *Relationship-based practice*: reform to systems and teams to allow social workers and other practitioners to spend more time working directly with children and families and to promote consistent and long-term relationships between families and practitioners.

### **Workforce development and support: key findings**

In recognition that effective child protection practice takes time and skills to deliver, local authorities are seeking to recruit and develop practitioners with the right skills and experience to work with vulnerable families, and to improve the working environment to allow practitioners to use those skills to greatest effect. Strategies include:

- *Recruitment activity*: In some areas, local workforce development and recruitment schemes to attract more social workers including 'grow your own' and partnerships with universities, regional recruitment programmes and rethinking the skills and qualifications needed to work with vulnerable families.
- *Caseload management*: Local authorities are exploring caseload measurement and management systems, providing administrative support and bringing in non-social work staff to do direct work with families in order to reduce caseloads.
- *Recording and reporting tools*: Some local authorities are reviewing information management and recording systems to free up social worker time to work with families.
- *Supervision*, including group supervision, training for managers in reflective supervision and supervision for early help workers to help them manage risk.
- *Workforce development strategies* to support new ways of working and the delivery of new approaches including the appointment of practice champions, secondments and coaching.

- *Career progression and practice leadership*: The appointment of principal social workers, consultant social workers and advanced practitioners aims to both improve retention of experienced social workers by providing a career path that allows continued work with families and provides additional practice expertise in social work (or multi-agency) teams.

## **Organisational systems and culture: key findings**

Recent research with local authorities has highlighted the importance of systems and culture of the organisation in supporting changes in practice (ISOS Partnership, 2015).

- *Vision and value statements* have been established in a number of authorities that encourage practitioners to put children first and to question procedures where they do not meet children's needs.
- *Performance management practices* have been introduced that gather qualitative data from case files, practitioners and children and families to augment the data and better understand how well the system is working.
- *Systems to promote multi-agency working*, including Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs and multi-disciplinary teams designed to meet the needs of particular groups of children and young people, such as those on the edge of care or those at risk of child sexual exploitation. This is supported by various leadership and management arrangements.

## **Gaps in the evidence**

The review found that there is limited evidence about what systems and practice are being developed in English local authorities.

- Most of the reports and research identified provided information about the context in which local authorities are operating, rather than how individual local authorities are responding to that context.
- There is no national overview of which approaches to practice, interventions or organisational arrangements are being used in different places.
- The evidence for activity in individual authorities is partial and fragmented, with available publications providing examples from a small sample of authorities and only on specific themes, or areas of activity. Much local authority activity is hidden from view. It is therefore impossible to provide a comprehensive and accurate overview of which local authorities are delivering activities presented as good practice in published reports.

## **Considerations for further exploration**

It is clear that some local authorities are using strategies that are presented as good practice with vulnerable children and families. However, it is impossible to tell how widespread these strategies and the related activities are nationally.

The review identified a range of approaches, interventions and systems in use in at least one local authority in England and mentioned in published reviews and reports, but it is very difficult to know how widespread any one approach is. Interventions where external support or funding is provided are more systematically documented than internally designed and delivered interventions or approaches to practice. It is even more difficult to determine the extent to which an intervention or approach is being applied in adherence to the prescribed model.

The evidence available regarding '*how and where* authorities are undertaking such activity' is essentially a series of case studies, enhanced by a few small-scale comparative studies providing some insight into how consistently each approach is being implemented. The evidence is skewed towards innovation, rather than embedded good practice, and towards government-funded projects over local initiatives – likely reflecting the challenges associated with local evaluation activity. There is little data on *how* local authorities are implementing various changes, the barriers to improvement or the influence of inspection or statutory guidance on attempts to innovate.

In terms of the activity that is documented, we know little about the motivations, attitudes, and knowledge that guide local authority decision-makers to select particular interventions or undergo particular reforms. We do not know what information they draw on to make these decisions, either about their local context or about what other authorities are doing. This may be a barrier in local authorities learning from each other as it is not always clear what problem the originating authority was trying to solve, or the values and vision that guided the development of that particular approach.

Understanding more about how authorities use evidence would offer some valuable insights that might illuminate some of these gaps in current knowledge. Work to explore this should aim to capture perspectives of colleagues at a number of different levels. Qualitative research, with a focus on why and how local authorities determine 'what is likely to be effective', could offer a rich perspective, and would be arguably more appropriate given the complexity of the issues raised in this report.

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## 1. Introduction

This research paper was produced as part of a wider project on improving the effectiveness of the child protection system, commissioned by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA) and supported by the NSPCC, Research in Practice and the University of Oxford. The project had five strands, all of which are published as separate research papers. An overview report, published by EIF and the LGA, brings together the key findings, lessons and recommendations from this wider programme of research.<sup>2</sup>

This report is the result of a rapid review of existing evidence about local authority child protection activity from a range of sources, predominantly literature produced and published by government and the sector, and academic research where this is available.

This report explores the question:

*Where and how are local authorities doing things presented as good practice in published reports in relation to improving child protection systems and practice?*

The report sets out:

- **The current evidence:** what we know about local authority activity to improve, adapt or innovate in the local child protection system.
- **The quality of that evidence:** what it can and can't tell us about local authority activity and the geographical coverage of specific types of improvement, adaptation and innovation.

The findings of this report were used to inform proposals for further research into local authority child protection practice, interventions and systems. Initial recommendations for that work are provided in the conclusion, and the report relating to that subsequent piece of work is available at <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/improving-the-effectiveness-of-the-child-protection-system-overview>.

### 1.1. Definitions

**Vulnerable children:** Children who need or are receiving targeted and/or specialist help from local authority children's services.

This includes, but is not restricted to, children involved in the child protection system. Also included in this definition are children receiving targeted services (which may be part of the early help offer) and those considered to be children in need under section 17 of the *Children Act 1989* due to concerns about the standard of care that they receive from their families, ie, those families that are at risk of entering the child protection system without further support. Services for looked after children, targeted support for disabled children or those with special educational needs, and broader early help and public health services are not included.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper and others in the series can be accessed via the EIF website, at <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/improving-the-effectiveness-of-the-child-protection-system-overview>

**Child protection practice:** The decisions and actions of individual practitioners with vulnerable children, including those who are at risk of, or are experiencing, significant harm. Decisions and actions include screening, assessment, planning, direct work, coordinating the work of others, and review.

**Child protection interventions:** A prescribed set of interactions designed for use with children at risk of, or experiencing, significant harm. As well as prescribing elements of practice, the most developed evidence-based interventions also include elements of management activity and oversight.

**Child protection systems:** The supporting procedures and processes, resources, structures, practical support and management and governance arrangements put in place by local authorities as employers of practitioners working with vulnerable children.

**Activity that is 'likely to be effective':** Decisions, actions and initiatives taken by local authorities designed to improve child protection services, based on an understanding of local need, local systems and broader knowledge of social work theory and practice. Activity includes:

- **Improvement:** Incremental improvements to practice and systems through support and challenge as part of everyday activity.
- **Adaptation:** The adoption of practice, interventions and systems designed elsewhere, with whatever extent of adaptation to local circumstances as is necessary.
- **Innovation:** The development of new approaches to practice, interventions or systems to meet local needs.

This report draws on national reports (eg, Ofsted publications) and reviews (eg, the *Munro Review of Child Protection* and the *Family Justice Review*) and existing academic literature reviews to identify changes to practice and systems widely thought to be 'likely to be effective'.

Examples are drawn from government, inspectorate and sector reports and academic research projects on local authority activity. This report does not make any judgement about the potential or actual effectiveness or otherwise of these efforts, only that the areas applying them and/or external sources indicate that these activities are believed to be effective, or likely to be effective.

**Inclusion of examples in this report should not be seen as endorsement of any particular practice by the author, by Research in Practice or by the Early Intervention Foundation.**

## 1.2. Methods

This report is the result of a rapid evidence review. Reflecting time and budget constraints, this report is *not* the result of a systematic review of the literature. The initial search strategy set out below was supplemented by publications known to the author and suggested by sector colleagues as relevant.

Both published academic studies and 'grey literature' publications published by central government and the sector were included.

The sources include:

- **National reports** that give insight about trends and how widespread particular approaches are across all English local authorities.

- **Deep dives and thematic reports** involving groups of local authorities that give more detailed information than national studies and highlight similarities and differences across the participating authorities.
- **Studies and reports into single authorities** that provide the richest detail but cannot provide information on how widespread a particular approach is across all local authorities, nor what other approaches might be being used to tackle a similar challenge.

In order to identify relevant literature, searches were conducted on the following databases and websites:

- Social Care Institute for Excellence Social Care Online database (includes academic articles where these are identified as relevant to the sector)
- gov.uk repository of research and evaluation publications
- Parliamentary Select Committee websites
- Ofsted website
- Association of Directors of Children's Services Research Group approvals list.

These databases were investigated using the following terms:

- 'child protection'
- 'vulnerable children'
- 'troubled families'
- 'child abuse'
- 'child sexual abuse'
- 'child neglect'
- 'social work'.

To be included in the review, publications had to refer to local authority social work activity in England between 2012 and 2016. This start date was chosen due to the substantial changes in the context in which local authority social work and child protection services operate at this time.

There were few academic studies into local authority child protection practice and systems that included descriptions of what the local authority was doing within the review's timeframe. The literature produced by government and the sector proved more fruitful in providing specific examples of local authority activity. Particularly relevant in this regard are the publications produced as part of the Department for Education Innovation Programme, which has provided funding to a number of local authorities to explore new ways of working. As a result, authorities participating in the Innovation Programme are particularly well-represented in the examples in this report – this may result in an unrepresentative picture of 'how and where' authorities are undertaking activity that is 'likely to be effective' in improving child protection systems and practice.

### **1.3. Scope**

#### **1.3.1. Levels of need for help and protection**

The report will focus on practice, interventions and systems provided for:

- **Children needing a social care response**, either under section 17 of the *Children Act 1989* or child protection provisions.
- **Families with multiple needs** but who do not meet the social care threshold and are receiving an intensive family support service, for example under the Troubled Families programme.

- **Children receiving targeted early help services** to support and improve parenting or family functioning.

Systems for providing early help in order to reduce demand for social care will also be included where this is provided at least in part by the local authority. Early help services provided by universal services, such as health visiting or children's centres, will not be included.

Services for looked after children are not included in this review. The exception is where local authorities are 'blurring the line' between non-care services for children in need and care services, in order to provide more consistent support to children and young people who repeatedly move in and out of care.

This report will explore:

- **pre-proceedings work** for children who need to enter care and become looked after
- **work with children returning home from care.**

The remit has been interpreted in this way for two reasons. Firstly, early help, children in need and those returning from care have been included because the literature shows that children prior to and after transition in and out of child protection systems and care continue to be at risk of harm (Ofsted, 2015a; Ward et al, 2010; Wade et al, 2010; Brandon et al, 2012). Secondly, looked after children are excluded because this part of the system for vulnerable children is equally as complex and diverse as the child protection system; to do it justice is certainly beyond the time and resource available for this project.

### **1.3.2. Timeframe**

The report covers local authority activity since 2012. This timescale was chosen as it covers the time in which local authorities have been responding to a wide number of changes to the policy landscape and reducing funding. The *Munro Review of Child Protection* and the *Family Justice Review* triggered significant changes in expectations about the way that child protection services are delivered and the standards on which they are judged. Examples of practice or systems prior to this date may not be considered current or realistic in today's conditions.

### **1.3.3. Organisations**

The report covers activity in local authorities in England, including work that these organisations are doing with partner agencies to provide a more holistic response to vulnerable children and families. The role of partner agencies in contributing to assessment and service provision for these groups is included, apart from the provision of specialist services (such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or adult social care). The role of universal and early help services in fulfilling their own duties (eg, education and child care) is not included, nor is their role in making referrals.

The report does not offer a comprehensive view of all activity in all local areas, only that activity that is described in the available literature. There will be much activity going on in local authorities that is not documented in this way and so is not included in this report.

### **1.3.4. How do child protection practices, interventions and systems fit together?**

The *Munro Review of Child Protection* (2011) took a 'systems approach' to analysing child protection practice. This approach recognises that social work practice takes place within the context of organisational culture, structure and

systems that influence practice, for better or worse. Furthermore, local authority children's services departments do not work in isolation; the action of partner agencies and the oversight of the Local Safeguarding Children Board of multi-agency working further influence practice and the experiences of children. Finally, children and local organisations are affected by the communities in which they live, and by national policy and demographic change.

The different levels of the child protection system are set out below.



**Figure 1: A model of the different levels of child protection activity**

As a result, the recommendations of Munro's review and subsequent policy development have included changes to be made at:

- **A practice level**, including changes to assessment, decision-making, and direct work with children and families.
- **A local system level**, including workforce development and organisational and multi-agency structures and processes.
- **Nationally**, including changes in legislation and guidance, national infrastructure and resources.

**Section 3** of this report, on national drivers of changes to child protection practice, interventions and systems, sets out how national policy change has influenced local authority child protection activity, and how local authorities have responded. It is important to note that much of the statutory framework and the inspection framework are based on evidence of what works for children at risk or experiencing significant harm, even if the influence of research and practice on policy is intermittent (Jones, 2010). As such, authorities that comply with these expectations are doing much that, under our definition, might be thought to be 'likely to be effective'.

In response to the circumstances outside of their control - changes in the national and local context - local authorities are seeking to make changes to local practice and systems. This approach to changing practice through reforming systems and workforce strategies is also highlighted in recent research into the experience of authorities attempting to improve following an inadequate Ofsted judgement (ISOS Partnership, 2016). **Sections 4-6** focus on local authority activity over and above statutory requirements. Activity that is 'likely to be effective' does not need to be new. There is much well-established practice and systems in local authorities that have stood the test of time. However, this practice is not often described in the available literature. More prevalent are reports setting out innovation, improvement and adaptation of practice and systems to reflect changing circumstances. This includes responses to those recommendations of the Munro review that did not make it into statutory requirements and innovations funded by the Department for Education Social Care Innovation Programme (SCIP). It also covers activity in local authorities with inadequate inspection judgements and the subsequent activity to improve beyond the minimum standards set by the government and Ofsted.

In reforming practice and systems, local authorities often look for *interventions* that have been shown to work elsewhere, whether that is through being subject to robust evaluation and/or is used commonly in other authorities and has anecdotal support for its effectiveness. Interventions are usually seen as part of practice – they influence or prescribe what social workers do with children and families.

Some interventions have been subject to robust evaluation, described as *evidence-based programmes*<sup>3</sup>. These are relatively well-documented and most strictly prescribe the activities that practitioners must undertake and the support with which they should be provided. These prescriptions should be followed with fidelity in order to increase confidence that they will have a similar impact to that shown in evaluation (Wiggins et al, 2012). Many of these evidence-based programmes seek to influence practice, workforce support and organisational systems, such as performance management. The practice manual for the intervention might include defining the frequency and style of supervision offered, the training practitioners need in how the intervention works and how practice should be recorded and monitored by managers, or external consultants.

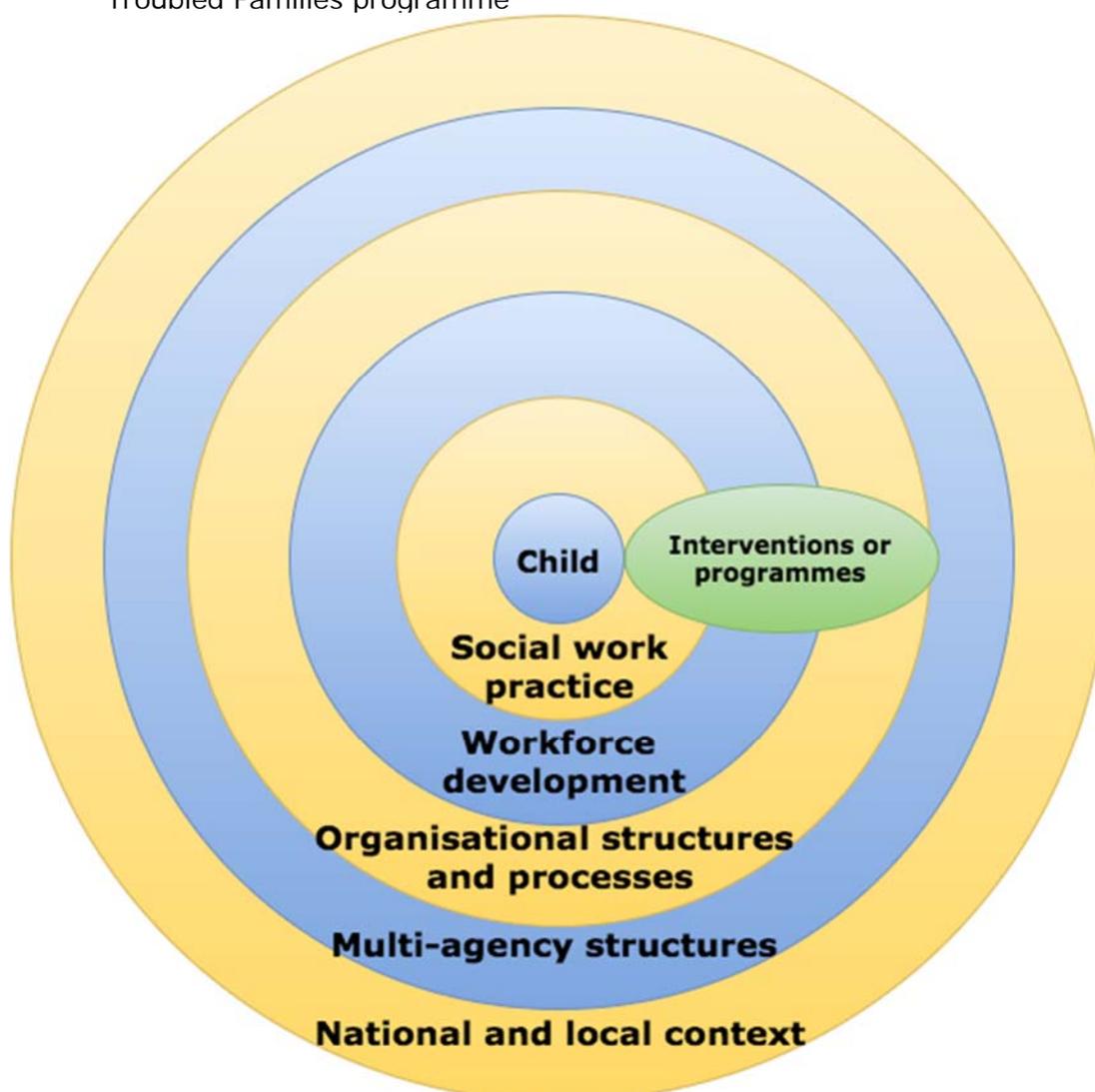
Other interventions with strong evidence have few fixed requirements other than at the practice level. This does not mean that the workforce development and system implications do not need considering before implementation; rather that these decisions need to be based on an understanding of both the intervention and the local system (Wiggins et al, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> For example, interventions are described as 'evidence-based' if they are included in the Early Intervention Foundation toolkit with a rating of 3 or 4 for the strength of evidence of effectiveness.

Specific interventions included in this report are:

- Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) and the variations on the programme for children with harmful sexual behaviours or suffering abuse and neglect
- Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
- Parenting programmes: Triple P, Webster-Stratton and Strengthening Families
- Intensive Family Intervention Projects, including that offered under the Troubled Families programme



**Figure 2: Interventions within child protection systems**

Innovation, adaptation and improvement can happen at a number of different levels, and in some authorities this has resulted in 'whole-systems change' in which all the different levels are changed at once, in an attempt to align priorities across practice, workforce culture and organisational structures and cultures (Spring Consortium, 2016).

#### **1.4. Why are we looking at what is 'likely to be effective'?**

Child protection practice and systems are complex. There is no magic bullet or single solution that 'will work' in every local authority. Even where there is evidence that a particular intervention or approach to practice is effective, they may not be effective in practice, when implemented within complex local systems of help and support (Wiggins et al, 2012)

The academic literature includes evaluations of specific interventions and various bodies work to encourage local authorities to consider the strength of evidence of effectiveness of particular interventions during the commissioning process. Nonetheless, robust evaluations do not exist for every intervention or approach; national reports and reviews therefore often highlight interventions and approaches thought likely to be effective, without rigorous evaluations.

Child protection work takes place within a complex system of organisations and social activity that can make evaluation difficult. Identifying the impact of relatively small changes in one part of the system, for example the tools that social workers use to make assessments, is difficult even with randomised controlled trials (RCTs), when the rest of the system is in flux in response to changes in government policy, economic and social change or where a child's own system (family, peers) is dynamic. In the time taken to measure long-term outcomes for children involved in RCTs, where these are measured at all, the surrounding system and context will have changed (Dixon et al, 2014). Other approaches to evaluation, such as quasi-experimental design, may be more useful in understanding impact in this context, but examples of local authorities employing this type of evaluation are very limited.

Furthermore, it is difficult to strictly define measures of an effective child protection system to use in evaluation, given the dual aim of child protection systems to keep more children out of care and living with their families where it is safe to do so, *and* to ensure that those who need protection are removed from harm as swiftly as possible. The reality is, of course, that the decision to bring a child into care should be driven by the needs and circumstances of the individual child. Measures of levels of demand, such as numbers of children entering care or on child protection plans, obscure the complexity of child protection work (Munro, 2011).

The quality of the available evidence about 'what works' is such that local authorities must exercise judgement, investing in activity that is likely to be effective, without the certainty that it will. The information available to them to guide these decisions is somewhat limited. Available information about what is likely to be effective covers practice, interventions, workforce development and organisational structures and processes and includes:

- recommendations from national reports and reviews
- findings from the academic literature, often accessed through summaries and briefings
- knowledge about what other local authorities are doing
- data and intelligence about the local system, challenges and barriers to practice.

So, where there are gaps in evidence, local authorities are faced with choices when designing and commissioning child protection systems:

- **Commission an evidence-based intervention and adapt as necessary to local circumstances.** Local implementations of specific interventions are not routinely subjected to repeated randomised controlled trials. It is difficult to judge when these local adaptations will affect how effective the intervention is.
- **Adopt and adapt a model of practice used elsewhere** but with less robust evidence. Some authorities 'cherry-pick' elements of different models and design new approaches based on similar principles.
- **Devise totally new approaches** to practice, interventions and systems that meet local needs.

Few local authorities undertake formal evaluation of practices and approaches that are being used locally. A small number of projects funded by the Department for Education Social Care Innovation Programme are attempting to demonstrate impact through comparison with a control group, but these results were not yet published at the time of writing.

## 2. What evidence is there for local authority activity?

There are a range of sources of evidence about local authority child protection activity, providing different levels of breadth and depth of information about innovation, improvement and adaptation occurring in local areas. Detail about the sources used and the search strategy used are provided above in Section 1.2. However, in total, the evidence is limited. There is no national overview of what local authorities are doing, or how likely it is that the activity is 'likely to be effective'. Individual examples are cited in reports from various national bodies; in some cases these are described as good practice, but there are rarely any clear criteria provided for why or how these examples were chosen.

The majority of this evidence is descriptive, rather than evaluative – that is, it describes what local authorities are doing, rather than attempting to draw judgements on the success or otherwise of those efforts. Material produced by Ofsted following inspections does define good child protection practice and systems and makes judgements about whether individual authorities are meeting those standards. There is some debate about whether the standards that Ofsted sets and the way those standards are applied to individual local authorities is robust and consistent (ISOS Partnership, 2016). While inspection reports do use the language of effectiveness, the inspection process is not designed to, and arguably cannot, evaluate the effectiveness of practice and systems with the rigour and validity of an academic evaluation (Munro, 2014).

There is a wealth of material about local authority activity and performance in general, and many opinion pieces and reviews that seek to make judgements or recommendations for how local authority practice might be improved. Many are based on the same handful of examples of local authority practice, or on informal knowledge about what local authorities are doing. Material is only included in this review if the findings are grounded in research (in its broadest sense) with local authorities.

### 2.1. Level of detail

National surveys and statistical publications covering all local authorities in England describe:

- **The high level context** in which local authorities operate, including demographic and economic change, demand for services, resources and spending, and the state of the social work market.
- **Current performance and outcomes for children**, as judged by performance data, inspection results and professional reports.
- **The organisational context** within local authorities, including structures, processes, interventions, workload and how professionals within the organisation view working there.

The third bullet point is most pertinent to the concerns of this report. However, the descriptions are, by necessity, broad and tend to use pre-determined questions in order to be able to analyse and present data from all authorities consistently. The findings of these national reports do not reflect the complexity of local communities and systems and may not identify innovative practice in individual authorities; nor can they capture important aspects of organisational culture or social work practice that are challenging to quantify.

Quantitative evidence about how many local authorities are using a particular approach or intervention is patchy. There have been a small number of national surveys attempting to identify how common a particular approach or practice is; for example, Bunn's (2013) survey of the use of Signs of Safety or the Home

Office funded survey of the implementation of Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) (Home Office, 2013). The results of these surveys are referenced in the main body of the report. The media and voluntary sector also undertake and publish surveys based on Freedom of Information requests and voluntary surveys; for example, into the use of powers to delegate social care functions (Stevenson and Shraer, 2015). For this report, some of the organisations overseeing the implementation of evidence-based programmes have been contacted to provide informal estimates of the number of local authorities using a particular intervention.

The various inspectorates of public agencies involved in child protection (Ofsted, CQC, HMIC, HMIP) offer evidence of the national picture of performance in child protection by presenting an overview of inspection results and an analysis of findings through annual reports. Other publications highlight good practice and innovation, including individual case studies and thematic reports describing local authority activity in specific areas of practice and parts of the system (eg, Ofsted, 2013; 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c and 2015d). These reports are used in subsequent sections. The inspection reports produced for individual authorities have not been reviewed as part of this rapid evidence review, but more examples of practice deemed to be good and of innovation can be found in individual reports. This may be an area for further research.

Deep dives and thematic reports involving a number of local authorities are also commissioned by other bodies, including government, sector bodies and voluntary organisations. These reports usually focus on a specific area of practice (such as assessment practice) or part of the system (for example, early help, or pre-proceedings). They provide more depth of insight into local authority motivations and practices and are able to provide more information about how systems are designed and implemented and the barriers to doing so. However, these studies are often limited in scope, looking only at the part of the system that is the subject of the study, and in detail. Seeking to draw comparisons between authorities again limits the amount of detail and complexity that can be included.

This report draws on case studies and examples used in a range of published reports. Individual case studies and material from thematic reviews vary in the level of detail provided. Some, but by no means all, give indications of one or more of the following:

- **the aims of the change** – what problem is being addressed
- **the theory of change** – why the selected solution is thought likely to be effective
- **detailed information about implementation** and process
- **system design** - how a particular innovation or improvement fits into the wider system of services
- **how effectiveness is judged** or measured.

## 2.2. Quality

The evidence for local authority activity also varies in quality and robustness. There are few peer-reviewed, robust studies examining contemporary child protection practice, interventions or systems in local authorities, and even fewer formally evaluating them for effectiveness. The time delay between an in-depth study of a local authority and publication means that many of the studies published within the timeframe of this report describe practice from before the significant changes in policy and context, since 2012.

Research into local authority practice and systems inevitably places a burden on responding local authorities. This can limit participation in research projects and national surveys, meaning that some authorities are under-represented in these studies and response rates to surveys may be too low to make generalisations. Findings may be distorted as those authorities under the most pressure locally may be least likely to respond. The small number of authorities rated good or better under the Single Inspection Framework makes these authorities very popular with researchers of all kinds, and a few authorities appear to be overly represented in the case studies and examples (eg, Hackney, Essex, Leeds, Hampshire). For other studies, it is often not clear how local authorities were selected to participate, or whether the sample is representative of all local authorities, (for example, including urban and rural, large and small, and different parts of the country). The literature on the reason for variation in local authority performance on a range of indicators does not give any clear framework for producing a robust sampling strategy, making generalisations to the wider population of authorities difficult (La Valle et al, 2016).

The extent to which local authority activity is documented in detail is patchy. Innovation, adaptation and improvement is more likely to be documented and subsequent learning published when it is funded by external sources that require reporting and evaluation as a condition of funding, most usually by government. As a result, government-funded schemes are more visible than internally devised and funded activity. As public bodies, local authorities do produce and publish reports presenting proposals for and progress on innovation, adaptation and improvement; for example, for approval by elected members. However, these internally produced documents have not been systematically reviewed as part of this report, due to the scale of the task. Where documents produced by local authorities are available and cited in other sources considered here, they are referenced. They are of variable quality and depth, and they are relatively few in number.

Local authorities with a new project or approach, or something that they believe to be effective, may have a greater tendency to participate in research, respond to surveys and produce reports and evaluations of their services. For some authorities, participating in research contributes to the learning culture within the organisation and, as such, is part of their strategy for innovation, adaptation and improvement (see, for example, Southwark's Research Interest Group<sup>4</sup>). Information on effectiveness of these projects is limited, as much of the reporting happens when a new project is introduced, rather than after a period of evaluation. The forthcoming evaluations of the Department for Education's Social Care Innovation Programme will provide more detail about some of the examples included in this report. The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) provided a repository of 'validated local practice' examples (examples of practice which were reviewed using a consistent set of criteria, but were not formally evaluated by C4EO). While the repository is still available, the pace and scale of new examples have been much reduced since national funding ceased and previous examples may no longer be operating since changes to policy context and local cutbacks.

Most material is produced by government, inspectorates and organisations in the children's services sector, either directly or through contracts with external bodies. While containing much valuable material and intelligence about what is happening in local authorities and the motivations and rationale for particular approaches, it must be recognised that these publications are commissioned,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://mylearningsource.co.uk/social-care/research-childrens-social-care/>

scoped and published in order to influence public debates about the resourcing and running of children's services. The questions asked, examples used and the conclusions drawn are therefore likely to support a particular perspective on local authority activity, whether that be the need for additional resources, for example, or more or less regulation and government oversight and intervention. The examples in these reports may be selected to contribute to debate, but may not be designed to accurately describe practice that is likely to be effective for others to follow, nor do they indicate how widely particular approaches are used.

The reports and studies draw on various sources of data about what is happening in local authorities. The majority of national studies predominantly rely on written responses or interviews with those leading and working in children's services, and only a small number include interviews with children and families. Children's services leaders and managers may be expressing intentions or plans to reform services, rather than current activity. In their review of police involvement in child protection, HMIC report *a mismatch between stated priorities and practice on the ground*, suggesting manager reports of what is happening in their organisations may not be entirely reliable (HMIC, 2015: p10). In contrast, children and families participating in studies are more likely to have used services in the recent past, and so may not be describing the most current practice (Hyde-Dryden et al, 2015).

### **2.3. What can the evidence tell us about local authority practice, interventions and systems?**

The previous section highlights that our knowledge of local authority child protection practice, interventions and systems – whilst containing many useful insights - is patchy and inconsistent.

- There is no national overview of the different approaches that local authorities are taking.
- There is more information for some approaches and interventions than others. This is not to say that particular interventions are more or less frequently used, but that some are better documented than others.
- Some local authorities actively seek opportunities to publicise their work, or be involved in research, so geographical coverage of the evidence is also patchy.
- The full range of activity in any one authority is rarely (if ever) described in full; rather, evidence focuses on one part of the system, or a particular reform, rather than the design of the entire system.

As a result, subsequent sections of this report will highlight particular approaches, practices and structures in use in local authorities in England, but cannot provide accurate estimates of how widely any particular approach is being used. This will need to be the subject of further research. Recommendations for further research, in terms of this overall project, are presented in the conclusion to this report.

### 3. The national picture

Local authorities and their partners have seen dramatic changes in the structures, resources and regulation of public services over the time period covered by this review. In this respect 'doing nothing' or 'business as usual' has not been an option. Local authorities have needed to adapt their practice and systems and resource allocation to respond (Department for Education, 2014).

This chapter reviews the context in which local authorities are operating and the changes to government policy that are shaping their activity. It appears the changes that local authorities are responding to fall into three categories:

- **changes that stimulate doing things differently**, without offering guidance on how or what should be done differently, ie, changes to population, demand and resources
- **changes that make specific directions** for how local authorities should change practice and systems, ie, changes to statutory guidance and legal duties
- **changes that seek to influence how local authorities respond**, but do not dictate the details, ie, Troubled Families programme and Department for Education Social Care Innovation Programme (SCIP).

There are a number of reports and reviews providing analysis and examples of how local authorities are responding to these changes in the national context. The main message from these studies is the variation in how, and how successfully, local authorities are adapting. Detailed findings are set out in each section below.

#### 3.1. Increased demand for child protection and care services

Recent data from the Department for Education set out the extent of the challenge for local authorities in meeting demand for children's social care services.

- There is significant variation in the number of children in need (including children in child protection plans and looked after children) per 10,000 children and young people, ranging from 141.9 in Wokingham to 683.4 in Hull.
- Referrals for assessment by children's social care were significantly higher in 2013-14 and 2014-15 than in the previous 4 years – rising from a stable 600,000 in 2010-13, to 658,000 in 2013-14, then falling slightly to 637,000 in 2014-15.
- Section 47 inquiries into child protection concerns and initial child protection conferences have risen by 12% and 10% respectively in the last year and there were 2,400 more children beginning child protection plans in 2014-15 than in 2013-14 (Department for Education, 2015).

Local authority applications for care proceedings published by Cafcass for 2015-16 tell a similar story of a national increase in activity, but with significant local variation.

- Nearly one third of local authorities saw applications for care proceedings fall, with the biggest fall of 40%, while 68% saw an increase, with the largest rise being 134%.
- 7% of local authorities have seen reduced demand for two years in a row, with the largest decrease over two years being 56%.
- 30% of local authorities have seen increased demand for two years in a row, with the largest increase being 325% (Cafcass, 2016).

The more detailed, if older, findings from the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Research<sup>5</sup> (Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014) further highlight the variation in demand on local authorities.

- Local authorities were asked to report numbers of children receiving services under section 17 as children in need, excluding children on child protection plans and looked after children. Ninety authorities were able to report the data requested. Nearly half of these had seen a decline in children in need, the rest had seen a rise.
- 68% of responding authorities had seen a rise in the number of children with child protection plans, with 34 authorities seeing a rise of 25% or more. For the other third, numbers were static or falling, with the biggest fall over 40%.
- The number of children on child protection plans per 10,000 children and young people in the area ranged from 5 to 105.

It is not simply that some local authorities are facing more demand for the same services, but also that local authorities are increasingly aware of different types of need not currently being met by traditional services. For example, academic research, government reports and local needs analysis have highlighted the risks faced by adolescents in relation to child sexual exploitation and homelessness and have stimulated the design of new services to better meet those needs (Hanson and Holmes, 2015).

Brookes and Brocklehurst (2014) explored with local authorities the reasons for the trends in child protection activity through qualitative interviews conducted alongside a national survey. Responses included:

- **Population changes:** Both the increase in the number of children and young people locally, changing demographics, and the consequent changing needs profile.
- **Early help services:** Some felt that early help services were identifying more children in need, thus increasing demand (22 LAs), while others felt that effective early help was diverting demand away from social care (29 LAs).
- **Deprivation and welfare reform:** Increased numbers of families and young people who are homeless, in acute stress and have no recourse to public funds.

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<sup>5</sup> The subsequent (5<sup>th</sup>) round of this ADCS-commissioned research was underway at the point of writing

- **Increased levels of need:** Most authorities reported domestic violence, parental mental health and substance misuse as key features of the majority of cases presenting to social care, with some noting that these cases are even more prevalent in children presenting to social care repeatedly.

The authors of this Safeguarding Pressures research offer some hypotheses for the reasons behind the variation:

- different arrangements at the front door, such as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) and combined front doors for early help and social care that lead to different definitions of contacts and referrals
- variation in the level of investment/cuts to early help and social care budgets (see below)
- different recording practices and definitions of 'children in need' and Early Help Assessments.

The variation in practice and systems at the front door is further revealed in Kirkman and Melrose's (2015) study of five local authorities' decision-making processes in terms of informational inputs, sign-off procedures and feedback to referrers and social workers involved in the case.

### 3.2. Reduced resources

The reduction in local authority budgets, and those of other partner agencies, is well-rehearsed (see, for example, the Local Government Association submission to the 2016 *Spending Review*<sup>6</sup>) and this report does not review the various estimates of the scale of the reductions. Instead, this report tries to explore how local authorities have responded to this cut in overall resources and how this has affected decisions about child protection practice and systems.

The removal of ring-fencing from most local authority services has led to local authorities shifting resources away from community services such as waste and road maintenance towards services for children and adults, primarily to meet statutory responsibilities (Local Government Association, 2015). Some places are attempting to reduce or manage demand for those statutory services in the future through prevention and early help (Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014). However, there is significant variation in how resources are distributed to the various parts of the system of services for children and families, with some authorities shifting spending to early intervention, while others struggle to resource statutory services to meet rising demand (National Children's Bureau, 2015). Variations in spending on social care is in part due to the variation in demand for social care services described above, but even those authorities seeing dramatic increases in demand have still experienced cuts to safeguarding budgets (Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014). New structures and systems for providing services to children make reporting on expenditure by category challenging, and the Section 251 return through which local authorities report spending is not sufficiently flexible to reflect this complexity (Freeman and Gill, 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> Local Government Association (2016) *Growth and opportunity for all: Local solutions to national challenges*.  
<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/7991192/LGA+submission+to+the+Autumn+Statement+2016.pdf/ae76f5e3-7a8a-49a1-aeb0-67c4fc61fef>

Strategies for managing resource reductions described in Brookes and Brocklehurst (2014) suggest that some local authorities are struggling to make long-term decisions aimed at reducing demand, while coping with short-term funding pressures.

Strategies include:

- increased targeting of services that were previously universal (children's centres and youth centres)
- reduction in administrative services and family support
- deletion of posts at manager level, and at frontline level in some instances.

However, some reported 'spend to save' projects, introducing new practices or systems that aim to reduce demand in the future. Many of these are the subject of discussion below.

Reduced resources are not limited to local authorities. Many police forces and Clinical Commissioning Groups have also seen significant funding cuts. Police forces have so far protected services for vulnerable people from budget cuts for the most part, but resources are not keeping pace with demand (HMIC, 2015). Budget reductions in partner agencies are also affecting the funding of some Local Safeguarding Children Boards, and thus their capacity to perform their functions (Baginsky and Holmes, 2015).

### **3.3. Supply and demand for social workers**

Local authorities face a further challenge in meeting their statutory responsibilities and their ability to improve, adapt and innovate - the difficulties many local authorities face in recruiting and retaining social workers and other skilled practitioners.

National data on vacancies, agency workers, absence and turnover in children's social care are relatively new, but paint a stark picture of the extent of the recruitment and retention challenge in some authorities. The vacancy rate across all authorities was 15% in September 2015 again masking significant variation, from 7% in Yorkshire and Humber to 29% in Outer London (DfE, 2016). The results of insufficient capacity among the permanent workforce are either a high dependency on expensive agency staff (so further reducing resources) or higher caseloads for existing staff (DfE, 2016). The agency rate for all authorities in 2015 was 16%, with similar regional variation to that in vacancies, as might be expected (DfE, 2016).

Once again, there is significant variation in the caseloads of social workers in different authorities, and a range of strategies for reducing them (DfE, 2016; ADCS, 2016). The Association of Directors of Children's Services caseload survey<sup>7</sup> found that the number of cases allocated to experienced social workers ranged from single digits to over 20 cases, though the types and complexity of cases included varied. Social workers consistently report caseloads being too high for direct work to manage risks to children in national surveys (APPG, 2013).

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<sup>7</sup> Available online: <http://adcs.org.uk/workforce/article/caseload-management-survey-report>

Local authorities report particular difficulty in recruiting experienced social workers (rather than newly qualified social workers requiring additional support) and first line managers to provide management oversight and supervision (ADCS, 2016; Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014; Ofsted, 2015).

The challenges that local authorities and their partners face and the resources available to address them vary considerably. The approaches and solutions thought to be 'likely to be effective' in addressing those challenges will also exhibit large variation in aims, methods and results. The responses of individual local authorities are set out in Sections 4-6 below.

### **3.4. Policy changes**

#### **3.4.1. Munro review and social work reform**

The *Munro Review of Child Protection* sought to take a 'systems approach' to analysing problems within child protection practice, including examining the environment in which social workers operate, and the support that they receive from leaders and managers to do their job well.

The recommendations of the review included calls for:

- Streamlining statutory guidance and reducing national prescription of practice and systems, including IT and performance data.
- A re-focusing of the inspection framework on the journey of the child.
- LSCBs to take into account local need when monitoring the effectiveness of services, including early help and multi-agency training.
- Further guidance on the role of the DCS and Lead Member.
- A duty to provide early help (not implemented).
- Setting out the skills required and opportunities for career progression for children and family social work.
- The appointment of principal social workers to provide professional leadership in local areas.

The recommendations of the Munro review have been influential in subsequent reforms both locally and nationally. Changes to the statutory guidance and inspection framework are set out briefly below, along with evidence for how local authorities have responded to these changes. But the most dramatic changes have occurred locally, reflecting Professor Munro's recommendation that:

*'Local authorities and their partners should start an ongoing process to review and redesign the ways in which child and family social work is delivered, drawing on evidence of effectiveness of helping methods where appropriate and supporting practice that can implement evidence based ways of working with children and families.'* Recommendation 13. (Munro, 2011)

One of the core messages of the review was that local authorities should reconsider their approach to measuring performance and quality through performance data and use other methods to investigate the quality of local systems, including incorporating the voice of the child and family into service design and review (Munro, 2011). This localised and qualitative approach to evaluating performance has led to further diversity of aims and approaches across local areas, as local authorities uncover weaknesses in different parts of the local system and seek to address them. Many good practice examples used in the review were adopted by individual local authorities, and these feature strongly in the local examples set out in Sections 4-6.

### **3.4.2. Family Justice Review and the Children and Family Act 2014**

Alongside the Munro review, the Norgrove review of family justice called for reform of the process of taking children into care, including setting a target timescale in which care proceedings should be completed, changes to the way local authorities prepare cases for court, the use of experts, and fundamental reform of the administration of the family courts. Local authorities have had to respond to a new 26-week target for care proceedings, since it was enshrined in legislation in 2014 (Department for Education, 2014a). The reforms have placed increased requirements on social workers to complete thorough and analytical assessments for court, and at an earlier stage in the process.

### **3.4.3. Policy-enabled innovation**

A number of government policy initiatives seek to encourage and stimulate local innovation, adaptation and improvement of child protection practice and systems.

- **The Department for Education Social Care Innovation Programme (SCIP)** has provided funding to over half of local authorities to devise, develop and adapt practice and systems to improve social work and work with young people in or on the edge of care (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- **The Early Intervention Foundation**, established to support local areas to develop approaches to early help rooted in evidence of effectiveness, has worked with a number of areas to develop system-wide approaches to early intervention.
- **Devolution** to combined authorities has led groups of authorities to work together to develop area-wide approaches to services for vulnerable children and families with multiple needs. Areas that have included services for children and families, and/or the integration of health and social care for the whole population in their devolution agreements include: Liverpool City Region, West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Cornwall, and the North East, though much of this work is at a very early stage (LGA, 2016).

Examples of the innovation, adaptation and improvement taking place under these programmes are included below.

### **3.5. Revisions to statutory guidance and inspection**

In respect of national government and Ofsted, and the duties and responsibilities they place on local authorities, the requirements are uniform<sup>8</sup>, applied to every local authority regardless of current or past performance or the demographic, financial and capacity challenges that they face. The effects of this guidance are therefore not uniform.

Revisions to *Working Together to Safeguard Children [WTSC]* in 2013 (and subsequently 2015) streamlined assessment processes for families referred to children's social care (Department for Education, 2015a). These changes to guidance provide local authorities with opportunities to innovate and introduce practices that they consider likely to be effective.

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, the Children and Social Work Bill is being debated. This has the potential to introduce exemptions for some local authorities.

Changes to the assessment process have allowed local authorities to change the way in which they work with children and families. Moving away from separate initial and core assessments to single assessment *serves to increase the scope for different approaches to service delivery and further blurring of the boundary between 'assessment' and 'intervention'*, ensuring families did not have to wait for the assessment to end before receiving a service (Munro and Stone, 2014).

Rather than introduce a duty on local authorities and partners to provide early help, the requirement to undertake early help assessments was added to statutory guidance (WTSC: Chapter 1, Department for Education, 2015a). Little information or prescription is included in the guidance, leaving local authorities to make their own arrangements to identify those children needing early help, undertake assessments and provide services to meet identified needs. Recommended and prescribed practices, such as the use of the Common Assessment Framework and guidance on the use of IT systems to record case information in social care were removed. Early help activity is not included in national data returns for children's services, but Brookes and Brocklehurst (2014) found that in the 74 responding authorities, the use of Early Help Assessments had increased by 29.8% between 2012-13 and 2013-14<sup>9</sup>. Once again significant variation was found in the number of assessments completed (ranging from 24 to 367 per 10,000 children) and differences in how and by whom these assessments were done. Some authorities struggled to engage universal services in assessing need for early help, while in others 25% of EHAs were undertaken by schools.

Further changes to *Working Together to Safeguard Children (WTSC)* included introducing requirements for Local Safeguarding Children Boards to coordinate and monitor early help as well as child protection (WTSC: Chapter 3, Department for Education, 2015a)<sup>10</sup>.

### 3.5.1. Inspection

Inspection results suggest that some local authorities are struggling to fulfill statutory requirements and provide effective support and protection for vulnerable children, while a small number are going beyond minimum expectations to develop approaches that the inspectorate considers effective.

The Ofsted Single Inspection Framework reviews services for children needing help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, and provides a national overview of performance (Ofsted, 2014a). Since the framework was introduced in 2013 up to the end of April 2016, two authorities have been found 'outstanding'<sup>11</sup>, 21 have been found 'good', 44 as 'requiring improvement' and 23 'inadequate'. The most relevant sub-judgement for our research question relates to services for children needing help and protection. In this sub-judgement:

- 20 have been found to be 'good', including 1 authority with a 'requires improvement' grade overall, and the 2 'outstanding' authorities.
- 50 have been found to 'require improvement', including 4 with an overall 'good' judgement and 3 found to be 'inadequate' overall.

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<sup>9</sup> While the response rate to the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures report is high for questions drawing on existing statutory data returns, the response rate falls when authorities were asked to draw on local data.

<sup>10</sup> At the time of writing, the Children and Social Work Bill is being debated. This includes provisions for LSCBs to be replaced by locally determined strategic multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

<sup>11</sup> To view an updated overview of SIF inspection results see <http://adcs.org.uk/inspection/article/sif-outcomes-summary>

- 20 have been found to be 'inadequate' (ADCS, 2016b).

The picture provided is limited by the fact that inspections have not been carried out in all 152 authorities since the inspection programme began. More in-depth analysis would be required to understand the correlation between overall effectiveness and judgements on the quality of services for children needing help and protection.

It is not only local authority services for children that are subject to inspection. Police and health inspectorates have also increased their focus on child protection work in inspections of services, in part to prepare for the introduction of a multi-agency inspection framework. As a result there is significant evidence contributing to the national picture of multi-agency work with vulnerable children, including:

- HMIC reviews of police responses to domestic violence, missing children, safeguarding, cyber abuse and child protection investigations (HMIC, 2014; 2014a; 2015; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c)
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2014) report into the role of probation teams and youth offending teams in keeping young people safe
- a thematic report resulting from the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) safeguarding and looked after children inspections of health services<sup>12</sup>.

These inspection reports provide a similar mixed picture of practice and policy locally. Like local authorities, police have seen increased numbers of referrals for domestic abuse and child abuse and neglect, as well as emerging categories of harm, such as child trafficking, online abuse and child sexual exploitation that have required innovative responses. While there are pockets of good practice in many areas, practice is not consistent and in some places even minimum statutory requirements, such as safe and well checks for missing children, are not being met (HMIC, 2015; HMIC, 2015a). Where examples are cited in these reports as good practice, they are included in Sections 4-6.

### **3.6. What do all these changes mean for local authority activity that is likely to be effective in their child protection systems?**

Local authorities have had to adapt, improve and innovate across their child protection systems to respond to a number of changes in demographics, resources and policy. These influences have had different effects, and of different intensity, in different local authorities. Some of the policy changes have provided local authorities with more freedom to tailor their proposals to these varying effects. Local authorities are using local knowledge and intelligence, both quantitative and qualitative to understand local challenges and devise local solutions. As a result, services for vulnerable children are designed, delivered and internally monitored differently up and down the country.

Sector-led activity, informal networks of authorities and regional collaborations and devolution of power to groups of authorities can bring some consistency in approach within each group. Some national programmes require compliance with particular models to a greater or lesser extent, which also increases consistency. However, these drivers of consistency are arguably negligible in the face of the varied challenges that local authorities face.

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.cqc.org.uk/content/not-seen-not-heard>

Local authorities are examining their own systems and local context to inform decision-making. Reviews by Ofsted and other research into local authority practice have highlighted the importance of performance information systems, quality assurance and informal intelligence about the system to guide decision-making:

- **Shared performance measures** across the partnership of agencies is seen as crucial to have a shared understanding of challenges and potential solutions.
- **The need for a forensic approach to analysis** of the system, including case audit and verbal feedback as well as performance data (ISOS Partnership, 2016).
- **Leaders with a 'firm grip' on the front line**, who proactively seek feedback on what is working and what is not, and with knowledge of individual cases, had better insight into what needed to change to improve experiences for children and families (Ofsted, 2015b).
- **Undertaking deep dives to understand the context** of performance information; for example, work in Redbridge to understand how child protection conferences supported, or did not support, the development of outcome-focused child protection plans, an issue identified through scrutinising data and audit findings (Ofsted, 2015b).

Naturally, local authorities are devising innovation based on an understanding of local need and local priorities. Examples of this 'logic modelling' can be seen in applications for the Department for Education Social Care Innovation Programme, where applicants were required to set out the problem that they were trying to address and to provide data and other evidence of the extent of the problem. This approach is, of course, not limited to participants in that programme (DfE, 2014).

Examples of how local authorities are using local knowledge to shape systems include:

- North Yorkshire identified an issue with inconsistent support for young people on the edge of care and those repeatedly coming back into care. Their analysis showed that less than half of these admissions were for abuse and neglect, the rest were affected by family functioning and anti-social behaviour, suggesting a different approach was needed to prevent care entry for this group. This led to the 'No Wrong Door' project which is described in more detail below (North Yorkshire, 2014).
- In the Redbridge example of improving child protection plans above, a new model 'Strengthening Families' was introduced to support practitioners in developing outcome-focused plans. A subsequent evaluation found that the approach had improved parental engagement and parental understanding of what they needed to do to address practitioners' concerns (Ofsted, 2015b).
- In Greater Manchester, devolution has led to participating authorities taking a wider geographical view of the local system of services for vulnerable children. Having identified significant variation in approaches and practice quality across the ten authorities, a shared five-year strategic plan has been devised to bring consistency in practice and in the support and challenge offered to practitioners; for example, a Greater Manchester-wide quality assurance framework. Other elements of this project are described in more detail below (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2015).

As the examples above show, in recognition of the need to take a 'systems approach', local authorities are looking beyond practice to the systems of support

and challenge and organisational structures and processes that support practice. The challenge for this report, and others attempting to describe the vast range of activity, is to identify a framework in which this variation can be described and categorised. Doing so will assist local authorities considering their next steps on the improvement journey by providing a source of ideas and case studies for change in different parts of the system, while retaining an understanding that improvements need to interact with all parts of the system to make a coherent whole.

The following sections provide examples of changes to local authority practice, interventions and systems that local authorities hope are likely to be effective in improving outcomes and keeping children safe.

- **Social work methods and practice** (Section 4)
- **Workforce capacity and culture** (Section 5)
- **Organisational systems, structures and culture** (Section 6)

Some of the most ambitious reform projects can be said to fit into more than one of these categories, and so individual local authorities are mentioned more than once.

#### **4. Social work methods and practice**

The core aim of the *Munro Review of Child Protection* was to focus attention on the quality of social work practice and how that practice could be improved. The review highlighted some key challenges associated with frontline practice, including:

- a lack of critical analysis in assessment
- a lack of direct work with children and families
- barriers to building and sustaining relationships with families (Munro, 2011).

While recognising that practice occurs within a working environment and set of organisational structures and practices, the review recommended that local authorities consider the skills and capacity of frontline staff to work effectively with children and families. This has involved local authorities in efforts to improve, adapt and innovate in the relevant areas of practice, including:

- assessment, analysis and evidence-gathering
- listening to the child's voice
- therapeutic interventions
- relationship-based practices and systems.

The diagram below (Figure 3) shows the improvements, adaptations and innovations put in place in local authorities in England that are included in the report. It shows that there have been attempts to deliver what is likely to be effective in some local authorities at every level of need and part of the child protection journey. While we cannot say how common many of these changes are, we can at least say that they are happening in some places.

Earlier, 'evidence-based' was explained to mean those interventions with a robust evaluation of effectiveness underpinning them. Some interventions deemed to be effective have more recently had their effectiveness brought into question by subsequent research. This report is concerned with what local authorities do that they deem 'likely to be effective', and so the interventions that were held to be evidence-based at the point of use are captured within this category.

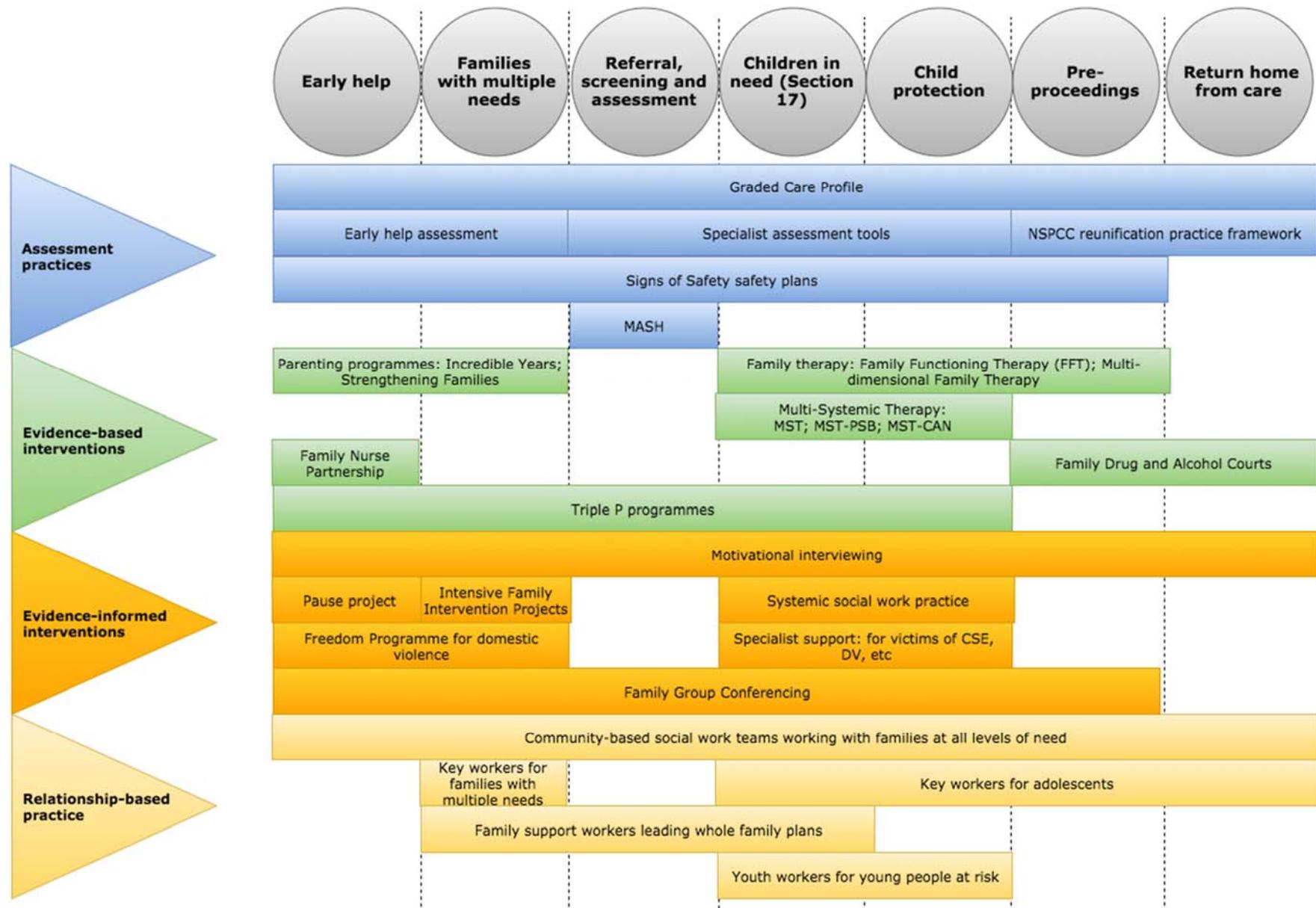


Figure 3 Improvement, adaptation and innovation in social work practice

#### 4.1. Assessment, analysis and evidence-gathering

The Munro review highlighted the vital role of social worker assessment and decision-making in ensuring that children get the right help at the right time. The information gathered in assessments and the way that information is analysed can have significant effects on a child's experience and outcomes; flawed assessments that do not identify risks to children are highlighted in the analysis of learning from serious case reviews in the last few years (Brandon et al, 2012). The need for strong analysis has also been identified as a key contributor to reducing the time for care proceedings and improving the quality of work in pre-proceedings and care applications (Brown and Turney, 2014).

There has been an increasing focus on structured professional judgement; that is, the use of evidence-informed assessment tools to guide (rather than replace) professional judgement about levels of risk and required action (Barlow et al, 2012). How tools are used in practice is important. A review of historical practice on CSE in Rotherham identified that some authorities were using risk assessment tools for child sexual exploitation in a way that was harmful to good assessment, taking an actuarial approach to quantifying risk, without applying professional judgement, leading to cumulative risks across a number of domains not being adequately identified (Jay, 2014). Work commissioned by the Early Intervention Foundation has identified concerns about the use of risk assessment tools to identify the risk of child sexual exploitation that have not been tested and validated (Early Intervention Foundation, 2016).

Ofsted provides some suggestions about what might be '*likely to be effective*' in assessment. In the recent thematic review of assessment practice in local authority children's social care covering ten authorities, Ofsted identified '*theoretical models of practice*' in most authorities included in the review, and noted that where these were more embedded, they were improving assessment practice. Ofsted notes that these models provide a unified approach and language that can be used by practitioners and managers, and help to support a strong culture and set of systems for working with children and families. Extensive training and good support materials supported practitioners to use the given model in their work and practitioners spoke confidently about the merits of the model (Ofsted, 2015c). In another thematic review on neglect, Ofsted notes that using standardised tools supported social workers in *apply[ing] structure and systematic analysis to very complex situations and to identify key areas of risk* (Ofsted, 2014). The implications of introducing new methods of assessment or particular interventions for systems and structures are set out in subsequent sections.

There are a range of assessment tools that aim to improve assessment and decision-making, and some focus on the analysis of significant harm in a child protection context. These assessment tools have a variable amount of evidence of their effectiveness in identifying risk of harm (Barlow et al, 2012). It is important to note that simply making an assessment tool available for practitioners to use does not necessarily improve practice. Organisational processes and workforce support and supervision are required to ensure that tools are used appropriately and consistently if they are to support more effective assessment.

Two tools that have been evaluated for their utility and applicability in the English child protection context, providing evidence for how far local authorities are using them in the ways that the designers intended, are:

- **The Graded Care Profile**, an assessment tool for use with parents to understand the quality of care being provided and identify where improvements are needed. It can also be used as a distance travelled tool.
- **Signs of Safety**, an assessment framework devised in Australia that focuses on the strengths and risks of the family network using a simple grid and scoring system.

A third tool, the Safeguarding Assessment and Analysis Framework tool (SAAF), is currently being evaluated for validity and utility and the results are expected in the near future (MacDonald et al, 2014).

The Graded Care Profile is predominantly used to guide decision-making around neglect. The Graded Care Profile has been evaluated and subsequently adapted by NSPCC to GCP2. The evaluation of the implementation of the Graded Care Profile underlined the need for supportive systems and processes to ensure proper use and to get the most from the tools. These systems and processes include supervision, recording, quality assurance and alignment with thresholds for intervention (Johnson and Cotmore, 2015).

NSPCC estimate that 20 authorities have been trained and are using the GCP2 tools and 'train the trainer' model of dissemination, with a further 40 expressing an interest in doing so. Work is ongoing to evaluate the adapted tool and to provide implementation support for authorities wanting to use this approach. Implementation support includes helping authorities to identify 'trigger points' when the tool can support decision-making, and authorities working with the NSPCC are using the GCP2 in a range of contexts, from early help to evidencing neglect for court proceedings to assessing the safety of planned returns home from care. Some are using it within or alongside other models, such as Signs of Safety. Findings from this work are expected to be published in 2016<sup>13</sup>.

A second commonly used approach to assessment are the tools and processes applied in the Signs of Safety framework. These tools are designed to improve family participation in risk assessment and safety planning, and to ensure that a family's strengths are considered alongside any risks to children. Signs of Safety emphasises the role of assessment as part of the therapeutic process, using the principles of brief solution-focused therapy to help families identify their own strengths and weaknesses and solutions to those difficulties. The approaches and tools are disseminated via training and accreditation of individual professionals and practice leaders. The owners of the Signs of Safety trademark have attempted to improve the consistency of this training and implementation support through the issuing of licences to approved trainers and consultants, and by clarifying the core components of the Signs of Safety model, as opposed to the tools and approaches commonly used within or alongside the core<sup>14</sup>. In recognition of the importance of the organisational elements in implementing Signs of Safety, an Innovation Programme funded project is working with ten authorities to develop organisational systems and processes to better embed the principles of Signs of Safety in practice<sup>15</sup>.

As with the Graded Care Profile, the developers of the assessment framework have identified the need for systems to support practitioners in its use, including:

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<sup>13</sup> This information has been provided to the author verbally in anticipation of the publication of the evaluation later this year.

<sup>14</sup> <http://sofs.s3.amazonaws.com/downloads/Open%20Letter%20-%20Signs%20of%20Safety%20Certification%20and%20Licensing%20Program.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <http://munroturnellmurphy.com/englandinnovations/>

- practice leadership
- the need for strong reflective supervision
- benchmarking data that reflect the principles of the model (eg, family participation) (Bunn, 2013).

It is difficult to say how many local authorities are using Signs of Safety. There is no central source of data on the number of authorities using Signs of Safety in England. A survey in 2011 identified 35 authorities using the approach and the author's own professional knowledge suggests that this is now much higher (Bunn, 2013).

Local authorities have also adopted other evidence-informed assessment tools and developed their own assessment tools and risk matrices to support practitioners in assessing particular types of need; for example, child sexual exploitation (see the approaches listed in the Research in Practice Evidence Scope on CSE, Frontline Briefing on assessing parental capacity to change and the Practice Tool for assessing risk of further child maltreatment for examples). Again, it is important to note that where assessment tools and risk matrices have not been thoroughly tested and validated, there is a risk that they do not accurately identify risks and may therefore hinder, rather than help, good assessment (Barlow, Fisher and Jones, 2012).

The removal of the Common Assessment Framework tools for assessing early help, and a less prescriptive approach to assessment in general, has led individual local authorities to devise their own assessment frameworks, or to provide suites of tools for social workers to use to assess different types of needs. In Northumberland, one example among many, a Vulnerability Checklist has been devised specifically for adolescents to reflect the different risks and needs of this group (Ofsted, 2013a).

## 4.2. Child's voice and participation

Understanding the child's wishes and experiences is a crucial component of any assessment of risk of harm. Lessons from serious case reviews frequently highlight the lack of the child's voice in assessments and decision-making as a crucial component for failure to protect them (Brandon et al, 2012). In particular, children's voices in cases involving child sexual exploitation and in understanding the impact of neglect have been highlighted in recent research and reviews (Berelowitz, 2013; Cossar et al, 2013).

Local authority efforts to listen to and record the voice of the child can be divided into two categories; those that encourage individual children to be involved in decisions about them, and those that give children and young people the opportunity to shape services at a more strategic level. Clearly these two categories are not mutually exclusive, and local authorities committed to participation do both where resources allow.

### 4.2.1. The child's voice in individual cases

Local authorities have sought to develop processes and tools to help social workers and other practitioners listen to children's views, wishes and feelings and to use these in decision-making. These efforts include:

- **Providing assessment tools and records that guide practitioners to record the child's views:** In Hertfordshire's SCIP funded project, social work records can be accessed and written on directly by children and

families, ensuring their voice is heard in decision-making (Spring Consortium, 2016).

- **Embedding practitioners with specific skills in engaging children into social work teams:** In Windsor and Maidenhead, youth workers take referrals from social workers to engage with and support young people to participate in planning the care and support that they will receive. Youth workers attend weekly case reviews within social work pods to provide a different perspective on the young people's needs and wishes (Ofsted, 2015d). In the 'Reclaiming Social Work' model a dedicated child worker has the role of talking to and working with children at risk (Forrester et al, 2013).
- **Ensuring access to advocacy:** In the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, an evaluation of the advocacy service found that children's views were better represented and recorded when an independent advocate was present (NCB, 2013).

#### 4.2.2. The child's voice in system design

Children's views about the services that they receive and how they can be improved provide an important perspective for local authorities looking to redesign systems and processes to be more effective. Activities to involve children in system design and evaluation include:

- **Forming consultation groups to give feedback:** While most authorities now have a Children in Care Council, fewer have mechanisms in place to hear from children involved in the child protection procedures. Ofsted (2013e) highlights work in North Lincolnshire where a consultation group of children who have experience of the child protection system has been formed. In Cheshire East, the LSCB has developed a shadow LSCB made up of young people to provide feedback on services.
- **Practitioners as researchers on children's experiences:** In Stockport, practitioner-researchers are embedded in teams to gather qualitative evidence from families about their experiences (Spring Consortium, 2016). One local authority participating in the Research in Practice Change Project on Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment conducted an internal research project led by practitioners to investigate what children and young people thought about the assessment process and how easy they found it to understand the language used in order to inform the redesign of assessment plans and recording processes (Brown and Turney, 2014).
- **Young people as experts by experience:** Young Inspector schemes are in place in a number of authorities, and some are well-embedded - for example Hampshire and Lincolnshire. The Wigan and Rochdale SCIP funded project involved children and young people in co-designing a pathway for victims of child sexual exploitation (Spring Consortium, 2016).

#### 4.3. Therapeutic approaches

Direct work with children and young people to help them understand and overcome negative experiences and behaviour is at the heart of social work practice. Professor Munro called for more focus to be put on the interactions that social workers have with children and families, and the therapeutic value of that contact (Munro, 2011). Direct work can be underpinned by various social work theories designed to bring about change in parenting behaviours, or improving family relationships.

Local authorities will often be using an array of therapeutic interventions, with varying levels of evidence, making a comprehensive analysis of where and how LAs are doing what is likely to be effective even more difficult. One example provided in Brookes and Brocklehurst (2014) shows the range of programmes that can be made available:

*'Although they have complex needs, other services are working pro-actively with these young people [involved with social care due to behaviour concerns] resulting in a decrease in demand for social care led provisions. Examples of services working with this age group include, Families First (Troubled Families), MST (Multi-Systemic Therapy), NVR (Non Violent Resistance) Programmes, specialised joint housing project with housing partners to respond to homelessness of 16-17 year olds, specialised team of multiagency professionals working with the police to respond to gang activities ie, Violent Organised Crime Unit (VOCU), London LA.'* (Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014: p61)

#### **4.3.1. Implementing and adapting evidence-based programmes**

As with some assessment tools, some authorities are using evidence-based programmes designed externally. Some of these approaches include external support for implementation and delivery, others are offered as a commissioned or contracted service by a third party and others can be adopted simply by existing practitioners being trained in specific approaches in order to integrate their learning into their own practice.

The more formal the level of implementation support, the more information is currently available about how many local authorities are using the approach (because they purchase licences and enter into contracts with the intervention 'owner'), and the more likely it is that when a local authority states that it is delivering a particular activity, the answer is comparable with other local authorities making similar claims.

Local authorities are providing access to evidence-based programmes either through external commissioning or in-house delivery by local authority staff. Evidence-based programmes which have a robust (or reasonably robust) evidence base are being implemented in a number of authorities. The National Implementation Service<sup>16</sup>, which supports local authorities in implementing evidence-based programmes, is working with:

- **9** authority areas on Family Functioning Therapy, including 3 authorities working together with Action for Children to scale up the approach as a part of the SCIP.
- **32** authority areas to develop and deliver Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST).<sup>17</sup>

These data do not tell us whether the service is provided in-house or is externally commissioned, whether from the voluntary sector, or the health service. It may be provided by other means in future; for example, Cambridgeshire is seeking to spin out the MST service into a mutual organisation to offer the service to other authorities. Cambridgeshire is also seeking a Social Impact Bond to extend the service further (Spring Consortium, 2016).

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.evidencebasedinterventions.org.uk/>

<sup>17</sup> NB: these programmes may be being delivered by local authority staff, health agencies or the voluntary sector.

Interventions designed to be used as earlier intervention, such as parent training approaches like Triple P and Incredible Years, are less easy to monitor and quantify. As with Signs of Safety, individual organisations are not accredited or licensed to use these approaches and so no central data is held. However, it is likely that these approaches are in use in some form in many authorities, given the universal funding provided under a previous government for implementation (Lindsay and Cullen, 2011). How these services have been affected by budget cuts and system redesign subsequently is not known. This would be a fruitful area for further research.

#### **4.3.2. Developing local interventions for specific needs**

As has been noted, there are gaps in the evidence base, with few evidence-based programmes for local authorities to draw on. Instead, local authorities develop their own local programmes to work directly with children and young people.

For example, another SCIP project seeks to scale up the Pause project, devised in a single local authority in 2013 to address the challenge of 'repeat removals' identified in academic research (see the work of Broadhurst et al, 2014). Working with mothers who have had children removed into care, in order to improve parenting approaches and behaviours for future children, the Pause project offers practical, emotional and therapeutic support to women to improve their lives. Pause project is being trialled in four authorities, overseen by Hackney where the project originated (Spring Consortium, 2016), and has very recently been awarded further funding to expand the project<sup>18</sup>.

A number of authorities are seeking to develop and evaluate interventions for victims of child sexual exploitation, such as the project in Wigan and Rochdale involving young people in co-design mentioned in the previous section (Spring Consortium, 2016).

#### **4.4. Relationship-based practice**

Related to whole family approaches, relationship-based practice focuses on the connections between the child and family members and the child and the practitioners who work with them. The relationship between family and practitioner is seen as therapeutic in itself, providing a safe and supportive environment in which parents can reflect and change. Furthermore, relationship-based practice highlights the complexity of child protection activity based on individual and family needs, and sees the trusted relationship with a practitioner as important to working within this complexity (Ruch, 2005; Ruch et al, 2010).

Relationship-based social work relies on the professional judgement and emotional response of individual social workers to decide how best to work with the complexity of children's experiences. There are relatively few specific practices or tools to support this approach. Leaders wishing to encourage this practice need to put in place systems and support that allow social workers to develop relationships with families, and offer them opportunities for reflection and challenge, to ensure that they are managing the tension between building the relationship and ensuring perspective is maintained regarding the risk of harm (Ruch et al, 2010).

Professor Munro noted that the way that children's services systems were designed meant that the child's journey through the system was characterised by

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<sup>18</sup> <http://springconsortium.com/projects-being-funded/>

broken relationships as children moved from one part of the system to another. The applications of thresholds for entry into a particular team and access to a particular group of workers are not helpful to children and families – they do not reflect their experience and they dislike having to tell their story over again - nor to practitioners who can suffer from 'start again' syndrome if information is not transferred properly and if families are resistant to engaging with a new set of practitioners (Munro, 2011).

#### **4.4.1. Key workers**

In one domain, work with families with multiple needs, the use of key workers and the development of skills for working closely with families is nearly universal, as it is required by the Troubled Families programme<sup>19</sup> in order to claim the payments associated with that scheme. The skills and attitudes deemed to be required by key workers for these families include:

- persistence and willingness to challenge families to change
- ability to build effective relationships with parents
- connection to local systems and able to signpost to other services (CIB, undated).

Key workers may be effective at engaging with families who do not usually engage voluntarily with public services.

- Wandsworth Troubled Families programme includes outreach workers who serve to 'demystify' the process of engaging with services and encourage families to take up support voluntarily.
- In Tower Hamlets, family support workers are embedded in services that have a close relationship with families who might need help, such as in housing associations (London Councils, 2014).

The key worker model of relationship-based practice has been extended in some authorities to work with other groups of vulnerable children and families. In a number of authorities, systems have been designed to support social workers in building and maintaining relationships, with young people and with partner agencies.

- In the Stockport SCIP funded project, social workers are allocated to communities and clusters of schools and social workers build relationships with young people and professionals before concerns arise.
- In North Yorkshire's SCIP funded 'No Wrong Door' project, young people are allocated a key worker as soon as they come into contact with social care, and that worker stays with them until they are 18, whether or not they eventually enter care, or return home. This approach was informed by consultation with young people who reported repeat assessments and changes of worker causing them to 'give up' on working with the service (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- In Hyde-Dryden et al's (2015) study of reunification, participating authorities reported that having 'locality teams' provided continuity for children returning home from care.
- Sefton's SCIP funded Community Adolescence Service team keeps the door open so cases are 'dormant', not closed, and respite residential is

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<sup>19</sup> Evaluation report available at:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/560499/Troubled\\_Families\\_Evaluation\\_Synthesis\\_Report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/560499/Troubled_Families_Evaluation_Synthesis_Report.pdf)

provided to offer intensive support to families to repair relationships (Spring Consortium, 2016).

#### 4.4.2. Interventions involving families in finding solutions

Practitioners working with families at any level of need can draw on the principles of relationship-based practice and strengths-based approaches. Interventions based on these principles are increasingly common in English local authorities, particularly Family Group Conferencing and motivational interviewing.

Forty-one local authorities are listed as using Family Group Conferencing on the website of the Family Rights Group<sup>20</sup>, as well as a number of local services run by the voluntary sector. Daybreak, a voluntary organisation, was funded through the SCIP to develop Family Group Conferencing in two more authorities. As no data was collected on how many authorities externally commission these services for families involved in the child protection system, many more authorities may have access to the service. Other authorities seek to deliver FGC or something similar in-house. All 12 of the authorities involved in the second phase of the research into progress implementing the *Family Justice Review* (Research in Practice, 2016) were using Family Group Conferencing or family meetings at this stage of the child protection journey (Department for Education, forthcoming). This suggests that this approach is widespread.

Furthermore, local authorities are developing the use of Family Group Conferencing beyond use in pre-proceedings and kinship care where it is recommended in statutory guidance.

- In Leeds, Family Group Conferencing is being offered at an earlier stage, in order to involve families earlier and reduce the need for care proceedings. This is happening as part of a wider system change (see Section 6.1) to embed restorative practice principles across all services for children and families (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- In Bolton, the use of Family Group Conferencing in association with Barnardo's was recognised as good practice by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2013c). The project brings together the extended family of the young carer to find alternatives to inappropriate caring responsibilities.
- Hyde-Dryden et al (2015) found that seven of the eight authorities involved in their study of reunification from care used Family Group Conferencing as part of that process. FGCs were seen as a helpful way of engaging the wider family network in preparing for the child's return home.

Motivational interviewing is being used as a central element of SCIP funded projects to improve engagement with families and family involvement in their plans. It is included as an element of workforce development projects in several authorities (eg, Leeds, Tri-borough), whilst in Islington motivational social work, of which motivational interviewing is a part, is the focus of social work practice and system reform (Spring Consortium, 2016).

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.frg.org.uk/>

## 5. Workforce capacity and culture

A number of studies and reviews of child protection practice have highlighted the importance of workforce capacity and culture in supporting and embedding changes to practice. Most obviously recruitment and retention of knowledgeable and skilled social workers is necessary to provide a stable workforce with sufficient capacity to implement the practical approaches thought likely to be effective. Secondly, these professionals must be able to access initial and ongoing training to develop skills in using interventions and approaches in practice, and they need to be supported to do so, on an ongoing basis through coaching and supervision. They need to be provided with tools and other logistical support to help them to embed new practices or interventions in their daily interactions with children and families, and led and managed by knowledgeable and experienced practitioners (Wiggins et al, 2012).

Staff turnover is a challenge to embedding any improvement or innovation in practice. Staff leave local authorities for a range of reasons, but some highlighted by research include:

- overly bureaucratic processes
- stress and burnout, linked to heavy workloads
- lack of clarity about roles and lack of opportunities to use professional discretion (Bowyer and Roe, 2015).

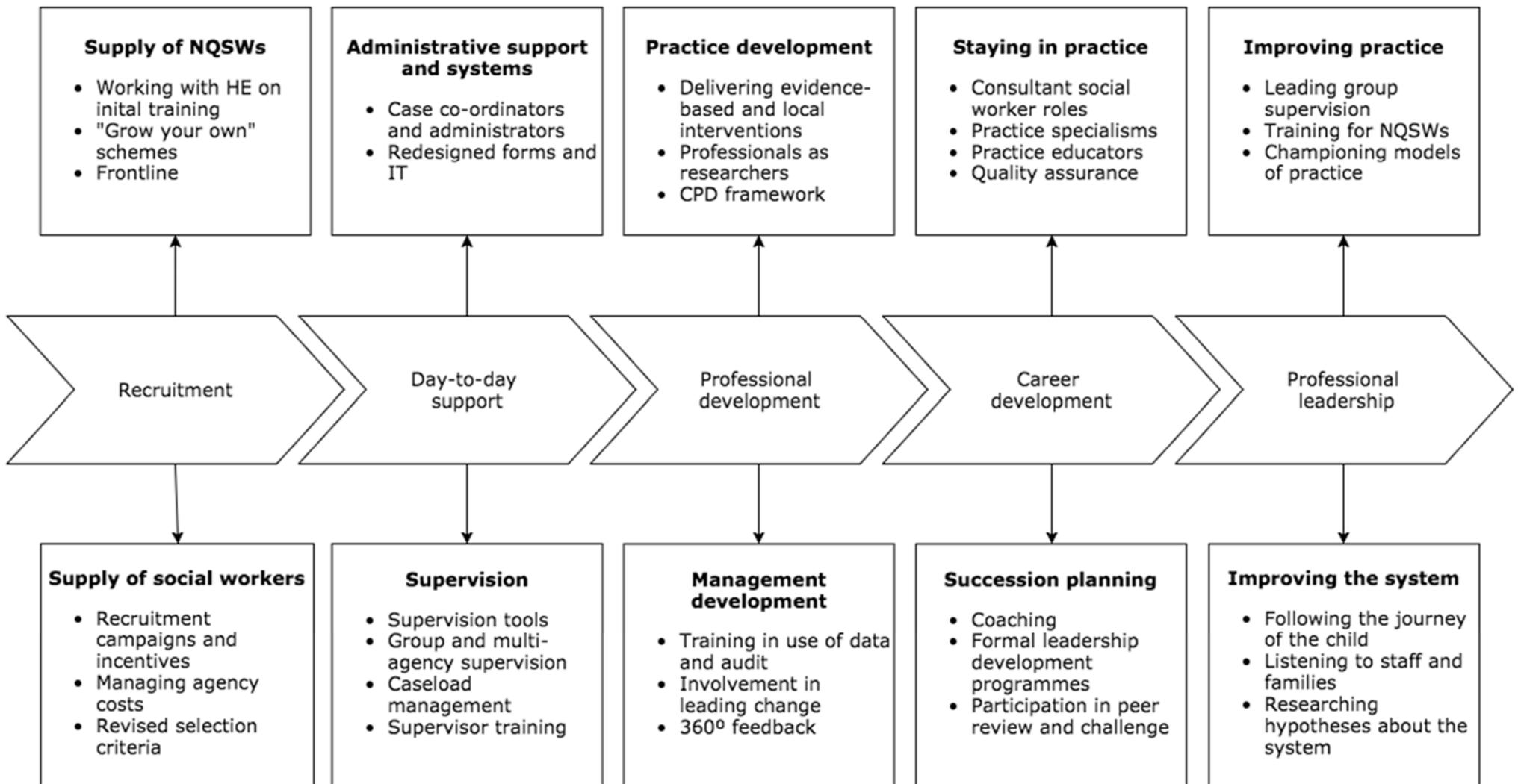
Conversely, factors that encourage workers to stay in an authority include:

- the ability to 'make a difference'
- high-quality supervision
- opportunities for career progression
- peer and organisational support for emotional wellbeing (Bowyer and Roe, 2015).

In order to understand what local authorities are doing to address retention challenges, we must look at their broader efforts to reform organisational systems and processes, as well as the support and challenge offered to the workforce directly. It should be noted that system change is not a panacea to recruitment and retention challenges, and can be a hindrance if the change process is disruptive and poorly managed (Bowyer and Roe, 2015). The organisational factors are set out in Section 6.

This section, summarised in the diagram Figure 4, sets out the range of local authority activity to improve workforce capacity and culture through:

- recruiting the right staff
- providing tools and support
- supervision
- training and career development
- professional leadership.



**Figure 4: Local authority activity to support the workforce (Godar, 2016)**

As in the previous section, the picture we have of local authority efforts to improve, adapt and innovate in support for the child protection workforce is partial. National data on workloads and workforce stability show that the pressures are different in different places, and so must responses be. The examples below are therefore just a sample of local authority activity in this regard.

Local authorities may hold much richer and more detailed intelligence on workforce capacity and culture and planned and current activity to improve. Local authorities, as employers of social workers, are expected to conduct Social Work Health Checks, auditing the support that is offered for social workers and the views of the workforce on the quality of that support (LGA, 2013). The results of these health checks and subsequent action plans would provide rich evidence about the current support offer for social workers and how local authorities plan to improve it. Some case studies show that individual authorities are using the process and involving staff through surveys and interviews in evaluating the quality of workforce support to complement national data, and involving staff in designing and monitoring action plans that result (UNISON, 2014). In Tower Hamlets, the social work health check influences the development of the learning and development programme, the agenda for a social work practice conference and the practice induction day (Stanley and Russell, 2014). However, there is no mandatory reporting or national overview of health checks, so it is not possible to say how many authorities are undertaking them or what they have found. This may be fruitful area for future research.

## **5.1. Recruitment**

While a stable skilled workforce is recognised as a fundamental ingredient for effective child protection practice, it is nonetheless the central barrier to improvement and innovation in many authorities. Without a stable workforce, children and families do not get the opportunity to form strong relationships with practitioners and indeed experience repeated broken relationships that reinforce their distrust of public services (Munro, 2011). When staff turnover is high, local authorities looking to embed specific practices and interventions are faced with additional ongoing training costs and struggle to sustain implementation (Fixsen et al, 2005). The difficulty is two-fold: recruiting the right calibre of staff in the first place and keeping those staff for a sustained period.

A number of authorities have taken steps to address recruitment challenges, in order to attract the right staff to take forward their vision for work with vulnerable families. Some approaches are common across a number of authorities including:

- 'Grow Your Own' social worker programmes, such as Step Up to Social Work, supporting practitioners in other disciplines to train and qualify as social workers within the authority.
- Partnerships with universities to shape initial social work training and offer placements in order to secure new recruits from those courses as permanent staff.
- Recruitment incentives, such as golden handshakes and help with housing and schooling for social workers' families (Bowyer and Roe, 2015; ISOS Partnership, 2016; Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014).

As well as these common approaches, individual authorities are using more innovative methods to get the right staff for their organisation and job roles within redesigned systems:

- Cheshire East and Catch22 wanted to attract family support workers with a range of skills and experience, and so did not ask for any formal qualifications when recruiting. Young people were involved in the process to ensure workers could engage with and talk to young people.
- Other authorities are using criteria such as emotional intelligence, reflection and analytical skills to ensure new recruits use these skills in their work (Spring Consortium, 2016).

Local authorities are increasingly recognising social work recruitment as a regional, rather than purely local, activity. The Local Government Association reported that five English regions were co-operating to manage supply and demand of qualified social workers in 2015, with progress in two more<sup>21</sup>.

- In Yorkshire and the Humber, authorities have taken a regional approach to recruiting social workers, with a coordinated campaign and website. The project has developed from a simple job vacancy site into a hub of resources for current social workers, listing training and networking opportunities, key contact information and a private forum for employees<sup>22</sup>.
- In the Eastern region, a Memorandum of Understanding brings local authorities together to take a strategic approach to workforce supply and work with universities, harmonising pay rates and working with agencies to reduce costs (LGA, 2014).

## 5.2. Managing workloads

Manageable workloads are an important tool in retaining social workers. Social workers value the opportunity to do direct work with children and families and the capacity to undertake ongoing professional development, both of which are hindered by excessive caseloads. Decision-making in assessment is influenced by practitioners' caseloads and the overall demand for services, and when caseloads are already high, this can lead to practitioners 'bouncing cases' elsewhere (Platt and Turney, 2014).

What is deemed to be an acceptable caseload varies from authority to authority, as does the type of cases that social workers are expected to hold. In some authorities social workers will work exclusively with children requiring protection from abuse and neglect, while others will also offer early help and/or work with looked after children as well (ADCS, 2016). In Newcastle, the Social Care Innovation Programme project is encouraging practitioners to specialise in particular types of work, such as families where domestic abuse is present, so caseloads are made up of these types of cases only (Spring Consortium, 2016).

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6188796/workforce+-+social+workers+-+collaborative+working+-+Map+of+QSW+agreements+updated+110915.pdf/ebb0e914-e4c1-484b-a8f8-586502de2df4>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.childrensocialworkmatters.org/>

Local authorities have developed a range of strategies for managing caseloads:

- caseload management systems
- pod structures and shared caseloads
- use of unqualified/alternatively qualified staff and volunteers.

Formal caseload management tools were uncommon among respondents to a recent survey by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (though the overall response rate was low at 21%) (ADCS, 2016). In most responding authorities caseloads are managed by first line managers and through supervision. Where formal tools were in use, various factors were considered when assessing the workload associated with the case, including:

- level of complexity
- time demands associated with specific tasks
- time demands of court preparation and attendance
- travel time for cases where children live out of the area
- personal development needs for the worker (in one authority).

Further strategies for caseload management show the interaction between system design, workforce support and practice. Authorities reported strategies including:

- **Mixed caseloads**, across levels of need, so that social workers are not always working on high numbers of more complex and risky cases, but have opportunities to build long-term relationships with children at an early stage, and on into their care journey.
- **Shared caseloads** within teams, and particularly social work pods, smaller teams led by a senior social worker or consultant social worker, in which responsibility for cases is shared among the whole pod<sup>23</sup>.
- **Improved screening**, investing in Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs and ensuring thresholds were being used appropriately by partners.
- **Improved management oversight**, setting up panels to oversee decision-making to reduce drift in cases and/or appointing consultant social workers to oversee cases and ensure they are progressed appropriately.
- **Increased capacity**, additional funding for agency workers and recruitment to attract more workers and incentives for retention.
- **More flexible capacity**, creating a larger number of smaller teams to better cope with peaks and troughs of demand (ADCS, 2016).

High caseloads can hinder social workers' time and ability to build relationships with families. Some authorities are considering what social care functions might be performed by alternatively qualified and unqualified workers or by volunteers, in order to manage demand without increasing the workload of qualified social workers. These authorities argue that a relationship with a trusted adult is a benefit, even when that worker is not qualified, provided risk is assessed and managed by professional social workers when required.

- In Cheshire East, a SCIP funded project is increasing the capacity of family support workers, employed by Catch22, to work with families with multiple needs and children in need under section 17. Funding conditions for the programme led to social workers being appointed to oversee this work, to

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<sup>23</sup> Local authorities manage case allocation within pod structures in different ways, with some still allocating cases to individuals, while others allocate to teams.

ensure compliance with statutory requirements (Spring Consortium, 2016).

- In Hampshire, a network of community volunteers will be recruited and trained to work with families. The authority commissioned a review of existing evidence about the use of volunteers in family support in order to inform the project design (IPC, 2015). Police are working with volunteer 'guardian angels' who patrol public areas at night, to provide additional face-to-face support for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation in the county (HMIC, 2015c).
- In Durham, a partnership with local voluntary organisations aims to increase the capacity of local charities to support families at an early stage, alongside investment in co-located early help and social work services, to reduce social worker caseloads (Spring Consortium, 2016)<sup>24</sup>.

Another approach to reducing social worker workload is to increase administrative support to fulfill non-social work tasks. This coordination and administration role has been introduced:

- In the 'Reclaiming Social Work' model developed in Hackney and being adopted by several local authorities as part of the SCIP. Case coordinators were seen as central to the model, by removing administrative tasks that do not require social work skills from practitioners, freeing up time for direct work with families (Forrester et al, 2013).
- In Hampshire and Sefton as part of wider reform projects funded by the SCIP (Spring Consortium, 2016).

### **5.3. Tools and administrative support**

The tools that social workers use to record and analyse information guides their thinking (Munro, 2011). The tools and recording systems introduced under successive governments have been criticised for distorting practice, taking up too much social worker time and not supporting analysis and critical thinking (Munro, 2011; Wastell and White, 2010).

New practices and interventions need to be supported by the right tools and recording systems to embed them in practice. Local authorities have devised their own tools and recording systems, since the relaxation of government requirements for social care IT systems. Local authorities have introduced new recording systems to respond to new policy demands, such as the reduced timescale for care proceedings. For example, authorities in the family justice deep dive were using sector-produced or locally devised templates and tools for producing court reports and evidence (Research in Practice, 2015).

The assessment models described in Section 5.1 are often accompanied by specific tools to guide practitioners to record and assess pertinent facts and relationships, as well as locally derived forms. The extent to which these tools are integrated with the IT systems that social workers use to make and review case records varies considerably.

- In Hertfordshire, electronic workbooks are being provided to multi-agency teams to allow case recording while working directly with families.

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<sup>24</sup> As described in a report to Durham County Council Cabinet:  
<http://democracy.durham.gov.uk/documents/s50259/CHILDRENS%20SERVICE%20FINAL%20APRIL%202015.pdf>

- The Signs of Safety project is seeking to develop tools for direct work with children and families that social workers can access electronically, while working with children and families, and recording systems that complement the Signs of Safety assessment tools (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- In Tower Hamlets, the Principal Social Worker undertook a review of processes and forms, based on shadowing frontline practitioners and talking to families. This has resulted in a one-page referral form for social workers to use when accessing additional services for families, and a clearer process for transferring cases between teams (Stanley and Russell, 2014).

#### 5.4. Supervision

Supervision helps social workers to manage the complexity of child protection practice, and the emotional impact of uncertainty and risk faced by practitioners (Munro, 2011). The Local Government Association has produced and revised *Standards for Employers of Social Workers* including standards for supervision in terms of frequency and quality (LGA, 2014). Social worker surveys report a lack of access to supervision, or supervision focusing on performance and case management, rather than reflective critical thinking or emotional support (Donovan, 2014).

There are examples of local authorities putting in place tools, systems and structures to support the provision of reflective supervision. A number of authorities have introduced group supervision, so that frontline practitioners can discuss cases together, share experience and give each other advice.

- Group case review is a core part of the systemic social work model, and the whole team participates and gets to know the issues facing individual families. This supports continuity for the family, as any worker from the team can respond to their requests for help from an informed position (Forrester et al, 2013).
- In Tower Hamlets, group supervision uses appreciative inquiry questioning and the Signs of Safety case mapping tool to help practitioners to apply analytical thinking in groups (Stanley and Russell, 2014).

As local authorities introduce new systems and structures (see the next section) to provide help earlier, or to involve multiple agencies, they have sought to extend the principles of supervision to the wider workforce. A Research in Practice Change Project on *Reflective Supervision* (Fox et al, 2016) worked with 11 local authorities to examine and support the development of supervision practice:

- In North Yorkshire, first line managers receive training in reflective supervision, including video recording of supervision practice and the opportunity to give and receive feedback from peers. An audit tool has been developed to ensure that practice is embedded.
- In Camden, group supervision for multi-disciplinary early help teams is used to help practitioners understand each other's perspectives, examine their own practices and patterns and develop shared hypotheses about what is happening in families. The supervision model mirrors the partnership approach taken with families.
- In Wirral, workers in the Intensive Family Support Services receive reflective supervision using the Wonnacott's Discrepancy Matrix to support them in interpreting and balancing information from a range of sources (Fox et al, 2016).

## 5.5. Workforce development

Effective training and workforce development is critical to introducing new practices and interventions. This is particularly the case when attempting to replicate the effectiveness of programmes with a robust evidence base, where training is a core component of ensuring model fidelity (Wiggins et al, 2012). Access to professional development opportunities also supports staff retention and signals the value that an organisation places on a skilled workforce.

One authority is working with the Open University to develop a CPD framework for social care staff, including but not exclusively for social workers. The project used the Knowledge and Skills Statements for social work practitioners and supervisors to design a CPD framework. The researchers then sought views of senior managers, practitioners and children and families about how well the current offer of training met practitioners' needs and what else they would like to see. The results highlighted that learning does not only occur through formal training, but in supervision and interaction with colleagues in less formal settings. The resulting CPD framework has been implemented in social care and is linked to the appraisal and personal development planning process (Simpson et al, 2015).

The way that training is delivered can affect its impact. There is strong evidence that one-off training sessions can be ineffective at affecting practice, without a clear focus on action plans and learning points in the session, and opportunities to reflect on what has changed as a result when back in everyday practice (Research in Practice, 2012). This suggests that professional development needs to involve managers as well as frontline practitioners, so that key messages are reinforced in supervision and team meetings. Local authorities have used a range of models to disseminate and embed new approaches to practice, including:

- **Practice champions:** The Tri-borough advertised for champions among existing staff at the outset of their wide-scale project to provide better workforce development for social workers. The project includes providing training to 600 workers and 200 managers in evidence-base interventions, including systemic practice, motivational interviewing and parenting theory and skills (Spring Consortium, 2016; Westminster City Council, 2015<sup>25</sup>).
- **Train the trainer models:** In authorities seeking whole-system change, the training demands are high; Leeds aims to train 6,000 practitioners in restorative practice and family group conferencing and is using a 'train-the-trainer' model to increase their capacity to deliver training (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- **On-the-job learning:** In Tri-borough and Sefton, whole staff conferences and formal training is complemented by secondments and co-location to embed values and practices (Spring Consortium, 2016).

Authorities seeking whole-systems change have recognised that it is not just social care colleagues who need access to professional development. Practitioners working with children and families in universal and targeted services have a role to play in translating the vision into better experiences for children.

- The Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association are developing an apprenticeship standard for people working with children across the children's services system, to

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/tri-borough-childrens-services-granted-%C2%A342-million>

support the development of skills in working with and listening to children<sup>26</sup>.

- The Open University project above has been extended to develop a CPD framework for local authority staff involved in providing early help, based on the CWDC core competency framework for the children's workforce (Simpson et al, 2015)<sup>27</sup>.

Career development is as important as learning new skills. Practitioners value having a clear career path, whether that is in practice or management. Local authorities have developed a range of activities and programmes to develop practice leaders and managers:

- The 'Reclaiming Social Work' model aims to provide a route for experienced practitioners to develop their careers while continuing to practice and work with children and families. This is both to support retention and to help support newer workers to develop their own skills (Forrester et al, 2013).
- In the Tri-borough, authorities have introduced a reflective coaching programme, to promote learning and feedback throughout the organisation (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- The focus on developing the workforce and particularly supporting social work students and newly qualified social workers, has led to an increase in the number of practice educator roles in some authorities, providing a different route for social workers to develop their career. In North Lincolnshire, a project to attract more social work students was led by practice educators working with the local university and schools (Ofsted, 2015b).

## 5.6. Professional leadership

Leaders need to understand the nature of social work and show that they understand it. This includes having an appreciation of complexity and risk, as well as recognising the emotional toll of working with vulnerable children and families. Professor Munro recommended that local authorities appoint a Principal Social Worker to provide professional leadership of practice, and this was then included in the *Standards for Employers of Social Workers* (LGA, 2014).

Principal Social Workers can play a key role in developing and overseeing professional development and the support offered to social workers to fulfill their role effectively. Local authority Principal Social Workers are reported to be:

- **Supporting newly qualified workers to develop their practice:** In Redbridge, the Principal Social Worker runs group supervision for newly qualified social workers, overseeing their professional development and providing a forum for expressing concerns and sharing experiences (LGA, 2014). In Coventry, Principal Social Workers are a conduit between the LA as employer, universities and the profession, ensuring that initial training and CPD supports social workers to meet requirements for registration and professional frameworks (LGA, 2014).

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[http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/Apprenticeship\\_Standard\\_for\\_Children\\_Young\\_People\\_and\\_Families\\_Practitioner\\_Oct2015.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/Apprenticeship_Standard_for_Children_Young_People_and_Families_Practitioner_Oct2015.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> The project is ongoing. The author of this study has kindly provided a verbal update on progress. Interim findings and more information can be found at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/js25984.html>

- **Leading on workforce development:** In Cornwall, the Principal Social Worker 'matrix manages' advanced practitioners in frontline teams and practice educators to ensure learning is embedded in practice (Stanley and Russell, 2014).
- **Representing social workers' concerns to senior management:** In Tower Hamlets, the Principal Social Worker consults with frontline practitioners and, as part of the senior management team, reports back on concerns and how changes are affecting practice. A dedicated email address has been established for staff to raise concerns (Stanley and Russell, 2014).
- **Understanding and researching how the system works for children and families:** In Cornwall, the Principal Social Worker continues to have a small caseload of statutory social work cases (Stanley and Russell, 2014). In Tower Hamlets, the Principal Social Worker co-works cases with frontline practitioners and follows the child's case through the system. This experiential learning can lead to procedural changes that might otherwise not reach the attention of senior management – for example, the PSW's experience of claiming back the cost of a cup of coffee for a young person led to changes in the expenses system (Stanley and Russell, 2014).

At the time of writing, the Department for Education is undertaking a consultation regarding the Assessment and Accreditation Programme for Practice Supervisors and Practice Leaders<sup>28</sup>.

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/448491/Consultation-document-knowledge-and-skills-practice-supervisors-and-practice-leaders.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/448491/Consultation-document-knowledge-and-skills-practice-supervisors-and-practice-leaders.pdf)

## **6. Organisational systems, structures and culture**

Organisational systems and structures influence social work practice in a number of ways. Leaders and managers transmit messages about what is important in practice through formal and informal interactions with staff. Those messages may not be consistent with each other; for example, when leaders say (and undoubtedly mean) that they value direct work with families but do not provide the resources or capacity for social workers to do this, or when performance monitoring focuses on meeting deadlines and filling out forms over quality of practice. Too much monitoring can leave social workers feeling de-skilled and lacking confidence, while too little can leave them feeling unsupported and vulnerable (Munro, 2011).

Designing systems that support good social work practice is complex. The work undertaken by the Early Intervention Foundation on Early Intervention Places shows the different elements of system design that need to be brought together to affect the services children and families receive, including:

- Engaging partners in a shared vision of services for children and families and agreeing thresholds.
- Deciding what outcomes are being sought for children and families and articulating a theory of change that shows how the services provided will help to achieve those outcomes.
- Commissioning appropriate interventions and ensuring referral and assessment processes enable the right help to be provided at the right time.
- Collecting performance information and developing quality assurance processes to ensure practice is having the right effect (EIF, 2014).

Research with local authorities improving from an inadequate judgement identified seven key areas to be addressed when devising and implementing their improvement plan, highlighting the importance of the layers surrounding social work practice in improving outcomes for children:

- strategic approach
- leadership and governance
- engaging and supporting the workforce
- engaging partners
- building the supporting apparatus
- fostering innovation
- judicious use of resources (ISOS Partnership, 2016).

Elements of organisational structure and culture are described below, including:

- developing an overarching vision
- performance monitoring and quality assurance
- multi-agency structures and processes.

### **6.1. Developing an overarching vision**

An overarching vision for what an organisation, or partnership, wants to achieve in its work with children and families is increasingly recognised as an important element in changing and embedding practice changes. In research with authorities at various stages of their improvement journey, ISOS Partnership (2016) highlights the difference between a short-term strategy to respond to a crisis, such as a poor Ofsted inspection, and the need for a longer term strategy that provides a stable foundation for future developments.

A vision brings together many of the approaches and strategies listed in previous sections, but gives them a coherence by demonstrating how they all contribute to an overarching strategy for improvement. Examples of how local authorities are translating a vision into practical strategies include:

- In North Yorkshire, the overarching vision is based on restorative practice and Signs of Safety. The principles and values inherent in these models are used to inform professional relationships as well as relationships and work with families, so the safety mapping tool is used in supervision and in strategic management so that the rationale for these decisions is presented in a consistent way to decisions about families.
- In Leeds, the overarching vision is for a 'Child Friendly City', and the city has adopted an explicit aim of prioritizing family life and relationships in their work with children. This translates into workforce development and practice through the introduction and use of Family Group Conferencing and restorative practice approaches to working with families.
- In Islington, motivational social work techniques are being used in supervision and through a system of coaching and reflection. This has led to discussions about how motivational social work practices and ways of thinking could be applied to other processes and systems within the organisation (Spring Consortium, 2016).

The 'Reclaiming Social Work' model also provides some examples of how organisational structures and culture affect practice. The model designers emphasise the importance of providing clear leadership around managing risk and social work values and setting a culture in which doing the right thing, not doing things right, is paramount, and encouraging social workers to think about what is best for families rather than complying with procedures (Forrester et al, 2013; Goodman and Trowler, 2012).

## **6.2. Performance monitoring and quality assurance**

The extensive use of performance data to monitor social work practice was identified by Professor Munro as a barrier to focusing on what matters in social work. Measures of time taken for assessment were seen to prioritise speed over quality and managerial focus on these numbers distorts social work practice (Broadhurst et al, 2009). Quantitative data, especially outcome measures, provide important intelligence about how the system is working, capacity and demand for services and indicators of quality of practice. Many local authorities have developed their own outcome frameworks, performance measures and data collection processes to better understand the system in which social workers operate.

Professor Munro also highlighted the importance of 'getting beneath' performance data to get a better understanding of the child's journey and the quality of the services that they receive. The shift in approach by Ofsted towards case audit as a core part of the inspection process has further stimulated local authorities to develop internal audit practices. In some authorities, case files are examined in dialogue with practitioners and used as an opportunity to give feedback on practice in individual cases, as well as intelligence about the system as a whole.

In a number of authorities, efforts are being made to involve practitioners and families in monitoring and improving performance through case audits, surveys and practitioners acting as researchers:

- In Halton, quarterly 'audit of practice' days involve senior managers and practitioners in case audits of the quality of practice, the child's voice and outcomes achieved in the last six months. The results provide feedback to practitioners about their own practice as well as informing changes to policy and procedures at an organisational level (Ofsted, 2013d).
- In Newcastle, data analysts are embedded in specialist teams working with families with similar needs and characteristics. It is hoped that this will allow the project to improve their understanding of which interventions work with different families (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- In Islington, the performance framework is being reformed to attempt to 'measure what matters', and focus on outcomes for children and families. Practice evaluators are based in social work teams and gather qualitative feedback from families about their experiences to inform evaluation of services and give feedback to staff. Social workers are also filmed in practice several times a year and given feedback based on the motivational social work principles guiding practice in that authority (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- In the Tri-borough authorities, the 'Focus on Practice' programme focuses on changing the way that practitioners work with families. Performance monitoring therefore focuses on practitioner behaviour and attitudes. The authorities have introduced a system of observation, coaching and feedback to embed learning and improve practice. A measurement of practice and survey of practitioners to measure attitudes is built into the programme at baseline and halfway through the change programme to provide intelligence on how the programme is developing<sup>29</sup>.

Local authorities have also introduced their own processes for decision-making to ensure that assessments are robust and suitable decisions are taken. These processes also support the development of multi-agency packages of support:

- A number of local authorities use a panel to oversee cases where there is a risk of child sexual exploitation. The panel in Thames Valley is cited as good practice by HMIC (HMIC, 2015a). The thresholds applied in order to trigger a referral to the panel vary considerably across local areas.
- Reunification panels, considering the support required for a child when they leave care to return home, are increasingly common (Hyde-Dryden et al, 2015a; Murphy and Fairtlough, 2014). However, in another study of reunification, some authorities felt that decision-making panels increased social worker workload and reduced professional discretion and, as such, were not advisable (Hyde-Dryden et al, 2015). This demonstrates the ambiguity for local authority managers in deciding what is 'likely to be effective' when designing systems to support practice.

### **6.3. Multi-agency systems and structures**

Social workers are not the only professionals with responsibility for keeping children safe. Police, health services and a number of other agencies have a duty to safeguard children under the *Children Act 2004*. These agencies have particular expertise in the child protection process, especially medical professionals who assess the cause of injuries to children and the police who lead on prosecuting perpetrators of abuse. Furthermore, public services will hold information about children and families that can inform assessment of risk of

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<sup>29</sup> See the [presentation](#) setting out the programme, theory of change and projected savings published by the tri-borough authorities.

harm, and universal services have a key role in identifying and referring children about whom they have concerns (Davies and Ward, 2012).

Putting in place systems that support practitioners in other agencies to contribute to assessment, planning and service provision helps social workers to focus on their core practice of working with children and families, improves the quality of assessments and ensures a holistic approach to planning and service provision (Munro, 2011).

### **6.3.1. Multi-agency front door**

A robust and consistent front door to social care is seen as one of the core elements of a safe system (ISOS Partnership, 2016). Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs are increasingly popular with local partnerships attempting to control demand for children's social care and to better identify those children at risk of harm, having been highlighted in the *Munro Review of Child Protection*. A Home Office study in 2013 found that approximately 40 local authorities had some multi-agency arrangements for receiving and analysing referrals into children's social care and that many more were planning on doing so. The report found that while the core elements of information-sharing, joint decision-making and coordinated intervention were present in many of these multi-agency arrangements, they were of different levels of maturity in terms of structure, with some coordinating practice through procedure and process, and some introducing virtual teams rather than actual co-location on shared premises (Home Office, 2014). In some local authorities, a shared front door, accepting referrals for both early help and social care, has been developed (Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014). The term MASH is not formally defined or controlled, and so is very likely to mean different things in different places.

### **6.3.2. Multi-agency interventions**

A number of local authorities in the Social Care Innovation Project have used funding to establish multi-agency safeguarding teams. Some offer a holistic package of support for all families, while others focus on a particular age group or families with particular needs:

- In Sefton, a SCIP funded project aims to develop a multi-agency service for adolescents, on a 'hub and spoke model' including police, youth offending, mental health and substance misuse services, based on social pedagogy and restorative practice values.
- In a number of authorities, social care teams include expertise in managing adult difficulties that affect the welfare of children, including Hertfordshire, Hampshire and Doncaster. Doncaster Children's Trust is involved in a number of different SCIP projects for specific needs (domestic violence, CSE, Pause), but draws together the expertise into multi-agency safeguarding teams including health, schools, social care and police, a domestic abuse advisor and a police specialist.
- In North Yorkshire, the adolescent hub is staffed by clinical psychologists, speech therapists, family circle workers, education training and employment support workers, placement support workers and homelessness support workers, reflecting the specific needs of adolescents on the edge of care.
- In Gloucestershire, adolescents are routinely offered a multi-agency assessment from social care, mental health and youth offending practitioners (Spring Consortium, 2016).

This approach is not limited to authorities involved in the SCIP.

- Several of the authorities in the joint inspection of the role of Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in the Troubled Families programme had established multi-agency hubs for analysing family data and assessing needs, drawing on a range of expertise including social care, YOTs, housing, and the voluntary sector. Co-located teams working with families on the programme did more joint working than those that were not co-located (CCI, 2015).
- In 2014, Brookes and Brocklehurst (2014) report one authority involving substance abuse and domestic violence specialists in Children in Need teams, and joint working to ensure children's services contribute to the specification of substance misuse and domestic violence services more broadly.
- The Eva Armsby Family Centre in Tower Hamlets provides a holistic package of support for families on the edge of care, including parenting assessments, supervised contact, and domestic violence interventions for perpetrators. The Centre has close links to CAMHS services and to the probation service who are directly involved in service provision for domestic violence perpetrators. By closely matching needs identified in social care assessments to support packages for individual families, the Centre reduces the need for care proceedings (Ofsted, 2013b).
- Specialist joint police and social work teams addressing children going missing and child sexual exploitation were identified by HMIC as offering the best approach to risk assessment and child protection (HMIC, 2015c). The specialist training helped police officers to listen to children and families, assess risk and pursue prosecutions where necessary. Specialist teams could also manage young people's offending behaviour when this brought them to the attention of the police.

### 6.3.3. Multi-agency leadership

Multi-agency contributions to child protection practice and interventions need to be supported by multi-agency leadership and governance. Involving strategic leaders in integrating services is crucial in order to ensure a shared vision for children, develop a shared performance and outcome framework and align processes and ways of working (Davies and Ward, 2012).

Local authorities are achieving this in a number of ways:

- **Combining leadership roles:** In some authorities, senior management appointments have been made jointly across children's services and one or more of adult social care, housing, leisure and public health in an attempt to promote closer working. The Association of Directors of Children's Services reports that at March 2016, 58 authorities had 'twin hat' directors with responsibility for children's services and adult social care, and notes that some authorities have unpicked these arrangements, having previously tried them, while others are trying them for the first time (ADCS, 2016b).
- **Multi-agency committees and boards:** These boards may be the Local Safeguarding Children Board, the Health and Wellbeing Board or the local multi-agency Children's Board or similar. Activities include multi-agency case audits and the development of performance outcome frameworks.
- **Multi-agency trusts:** Currently operating in Doncaster and Slough and proposed elsewhere are integrated Trusts, bringing together children's services and other agencies into single organisations separate from the local authority. With a single budget, single management chain and shared

culture it is believed that these structures will promote better integrated working (Le Grand et al, 2013).

#### 6.3.4. Multi-authority leadership and governance

Related to multi-agency leadership and governance are projects that bring together more than one local authority to co-operate in delivering a specific service, or the whole range of services for children and families. Examples of multi-authority partnerships include:

- **Shared leadership and governance:** For example, the Tri-borough arrangement and Achieving for Children, the Community Interest Company running children's services in Kingston and Richmond.
- **Borrowed leadership:** For example, the appointment of commissioners from other authorities to provide temporary leadership within authorities deemed to be inadequate following inspection (eg, Hampshire in the Isle of Wight and Kingston and Richmond in Sunderland).
- **Joint commissioning:** Particularly of services where demand is low in an individual authority, but where co-operation across boundaries can ensure that the project is feasible; for example, the three authorities working with Action for Children to scale up the use of evidence-based interventions (Spring Consortium, 2016).
- **Combined authorities:** For example, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority which has negotiated devolved powers from central government, and is seeking to develop a consistent approach to children's services across the ten participating authorities (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2015).
- **Shared scrutiny and challenge:** A number of local authorities co-operate under an umbrella Local Safeguarding Children Board supporting the LSCB in each authority, such as arrangements in London, the South West, Luton and Bedfordshire. Regional co-operation to support sector-led improvement and peer challenge is also in place in most regions, though the extent of activity varies from one region to another<sup>30</sup>. This multi-authority approach to improvement and scrutiny promotes the development of shared approaches to performance management and quality assurance through shared/aligned outcome frameworks and arrangements for case audit, as well as shared learning across member authorities<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> For a range of information about regional sector-led improvement activity see ADCS website: <http://adcs.org.uk/inspection/article/regional-sli-directory#overall>

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the [Eastern Region LSCB Outcomes Framework](#) developed under the auspices of sector-led improvement.

## 7. What does the evidence tell us about the national picture of local authority innovation, adaptation and improvement?

The policy framework in which local authorities and their partners operate their child protection systems is in flux. Many of those changes have led to increased freedom for local authorities to innovate, adapt and improve those systems in response to new pressures and requirements – though these freedoms are set against drastically reduced resources. The reforms have led local authorities to take significant steps to accommodate the wide-ranging demands and priorities set out in government policy. This review has only considered those policy changes affecting services for vulnerable children living at home – there has been a great deal of policy change for services for looked after children. Most authorities have sought to reform parts of their child protection system. Those with sufficient stability and capacity (either internal or from external sources) have pursued whole-system change.

Performance data reveal that there is significant variation in performance on various measures of demand, capacity, quality and timeliness, suggesting that some local authorities are currently more successful in their efforts than others. Demographic and demand data further show that the challenges are different across the country and local areas are necessarily choosing to prioritise different parts of the system in order to respond to local need.

There are some common themes among local authority motivations and approaches that echo the key messages from reviews and evidence over the years:

- **Improving early help and prevention**, in order to reduce demand for children's social care.
- **Improving the front door to children's social care** to ensure that referrals are treated appropriately first time.
- **Introducing models of practice and assessment** to support professional decision-making and promote consistency.
- **Adoption and adaptation of evidence-based programmes.**
- **Service and structure redesign** to support improvements in practice and workforce support.
- **Integration of services through multi-agency working** to offer more holistic support, often to adults as well as children in the family.

### 7.1. The breadth and spread of innovation, adaptation and improvement in English local authorities

The available evidence gives an indication that innovation, adaptation and improvement is underway in the vast majority of authorities. The political and financial context leaves few other options. However, quantifying this effort in terms of numbers of authorities using a particular approach relies on:

- a shared definition and naming of the approach
- a previous comprehensive survey having been undertaken, and the findings being monitored and published.

This information is only available for a small number of the approaches and innovations described in this report, and even where it is available, much of the survey data are out of date. There is arguably a need for a research project that can highlight and disseminate information about the vast range of activity going on in English local authorities.

### **7.1.1. The take-up of named interventions**

Faced with significant challenges and increased freedom to decide solutions to those challenges, and thus having greater responsibility for decisions, many local authorities have looked for solutions that have been tried and appear to have worked elsewhere.

The authorities commissioning and delivering these interventions will have rich experience to share with others about their implementation journey, and how they have established the necessary systems to support and complement the intervention. It is unlikely that this is the only improvement, adaptation or innovation that they have planned or have undertaken. Involving authorities with experience of implementing evidence-based interventions in subsequent in-depth work into local authority practice and systems would produce valuable learning for the sector.

Data on take-up of individual programmes are only available for a few of the approaches mentioned in this report and are in constant flux. The local authority surveys exploring this were done three years ago, and findings will certainly have changed. It is not known how many of these were services being directly provided or commissioned externally from third party providers.

An initial 'yes/no' survey question about use of these evidence-based or evidence-informed interventions (for example, Triple P, Signs of Safety, Family Group Conferences) would provide useful intelligence about the geographical spread of these interventions, but would need further investigation through deep dives to understand in which parts of the system these approaches are used, and with what degree of consistency.

The evaluation reports of the Social Care Innovation Projects in which these interventions are being scaled up across a number of local authorities may provide a deeper picture of the implementation challenges and activities undertaken by those authorities. Relevant projects include:

- the delivery of Multi-Systemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy over three sites by Action for Children
- the development of organisational structures to support the delivery of Signs of Safety in ten local authorities.

### **7.1.2. Locally designed and delivered improvements, adaptations and innovations**

Other than adopting and adapting named interventions from elsewhere, it is clear that many local authorities are devising their own approaches to practice, and designing systems that meet local needs. However, only a partial picture of what those reforms are or where they are happening is possible to ascertain in this report.

Government reforms and subsequent research tends to focus on a specific part of the child protection system, investigating a particular stage of the process, such as the front door, or pre-proceedings, or how services respond to a particular type of risk/need, eg, child sexual exploitation.

However, taking a systems approach and considering the journey of the child through services has led to local authorities designing different systems that are

not so linear or easily defined. The Social Care Innovation Programme provides significant evidence about the types of reform that the participating authorities are undertaking. Given the coverage of this programme, involving more than 50 projects and involving over half of local authorities in England, we can say that innovation is widespread, but also that there is significant variation in the approaches local authorities are taking. The evaluations of these projects, being published in late 2016, provide rich and detailed information about authorities' aims, theories of change, activity and at least partial indicators of success.

Local authorities have reformed structures and systems to better meet the needs of children and families. These changes to systems include:

- **Improved tools for assessment and recording** from early help to pre-proceedings.
- **Continuity of support** across thresholds of need and co-location of early help and social care teams.
- **Multi-agency structures and processes**, such as the MASH and more integrated delivery teams.
- **Improved management oversight of practice**, including case management systems, decision-making panels and supervision arrangements.
- **Joint commissioning arrangements**, externally commissioned services and multi-agency organisations separate from the local authority.

Some authorities are pursuing whole-system change, and redesigning systems across the organisation; others are focusing on specific areas of practice or known weaknesses. Thus the arrangements for meeting children's needs, and the quality of those responses, will continue to vary.

As a result, the standard conceptual model of understanding the structure and processes for children's services (referral, assessment, planning, intervention, review) does not necessarily map the journey of the child in any particular authority. How referrals are managed, the points when children transfer between teams, the types of assessment they receive, the length of time that they stay in contact with services and their access to step-down support will vary considerably from area to area. Already, researchers are noting that the performance information collected by the Department for Education may not be comparable across areas, including definitions and significance of referrals and contacts, assessments and case closure data (Brookes and Brocklehurst, 2014). Exploring what the child's journey looks like in different authorities would provide a comparative picture of how the journey differs from one authority to another.

## 7.2. Gaps in the evidence

The evidence available about what and how local authorities are doing that which is likely to be effective is very fragmented. There is no systematic overview of the different approaches to practice, interventions and systems that local authorities are taking. The evidence available is little more than a series of case studies, with a few small-scale comparative studies providing some insight into how consistently each approach is being implemented. The evidence is skewed towards innovation, rather than embedded good practice, and towards government-funded projects over local initiatives. There is little data on how local authorities are implementing various changes, the barriers to improvement or the influence of inspection or statutory guidance on attempts to innovate.

Regarding the activity we do know about, we know little about the motivations, attitudes, and knowledge that guide local authority decision-makers to select

particular interventions or undergo particular reforms. We do not know what information they draw on to make these decisions, either about their local context or about what other authorities are doing. This may be a barrier in local authorities learning from each other as it is not always clear what problem the originating authority was trying to solve, or the values and vision that guided the development of that particular approach.

Throughout this report a number of sources of evidence about individual local authorities have been noted:

- Ofsted inspection reports following visits to each authority.
- Local authority generated reports to elected members or public boards that describe their plans for reforming the system or introducing new approaches to practice or interventions.
- Local authority social work health checks and subsequent action plans.

While it has not been possible to review these documents as part of this report, they may be fruitful sources of further intelligence about local authority activity and an analysis of these might support a sampling strategy to select local authorities for the deep dives recommended below.

### **7.3. Next steps**

A phased approach is suggested for Phase 2b of this project, in order to capture both the breadth and depth of innovation, adaptation and improvement in English local authorities' child protection systems.

A national survey, led by an organisation that could secure strong participation rates, could help to quantify the spread of evidence-based practice and programmes. The list of evidence based interventions, programmes and approaches would need to be clearly defined with a common standard of evidence used to decide what is meant by 'evidence-based'. The survey would need to target professional leaders of practice and those overseeing practice reforms, such as Principal Social Workers, and commissioners with responsibility for securing any external provision. This approach would be effective in getting a broad overview of how far local authorities are taking actions under the various headings within this report. Findings will be most useful in understanding the spread of evidence-based programmes that are easily named in a list. Even this has weaknesses, given the variation in implementation support and quality assurance offered by the different programmes. Those activities which are not overseen by an external body may be named and delivered differently in different areas and reported differently in different places. The results would need to be treated with caution but would provide a foundation for a deep dive in a small number of authorities.

More complex or nuanced activity will be harder to capture through a survey, and it will be necessary to engage system leaders and managers in defining and refining the questions. While a national survey will provide a broad overview of innovation, adaptation and improvement, it will not capture *how* individual authorities apply evidence, or the impact of this activity on the journey of vulnerable children within that system.

For this purpose, a deep dive involving eight to ten authorities is suggested. These authorities should not be 'the usual suspects' whose innovations are well documented but instead should seek to surface the extent of innovation that is ongoing in authorities that may be less well documented. Sampling could be informed by knowledge of local authorities' use of evidence-based interventions,

innovation projects underway and informal knowledge held by professional networks about particularly interesting activity that would benefit from a higher profile in the sector.

The deep dives might use simple pen pictures of children with different types of needs to explore what their journey from needing to receiving help would look like in each authority and the information available to senior managers about this journey. The journey of the child could then be used as a starting point for discussion with senior managers, Principal Social Workers and system leaders about why particular decisions about practice, interventions and systems have been taken.

This further exploration would seek to provide data on attitudes and beliefs guiding local authority activity to improve, adapt and innovate. This exploration might include, for example, attitudes to using evidence of effectiveness and commissioning of particular interventions versus local design. It would also offer an opportunity to explore perspectives around statutory regulations and guidance and how far these support or hinder innovation and evidence-informed practice locally.

## **Postscript**

Strand 2b was undertaken between September and November 2016. It involved undertaking deep dives in five local authorities, interviewing colleagues across a number of levels (elected representatives, commissioners, practice leaders, practitioners and frontline managers). This qualitative research aimed to explore these colleagues' understanding and use of research evidence regarding 'what works' in child protection practice, services and systems.

The report is available here at <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/improving-the-effectiveness-of-the-child-protection-system-overview>.

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