

Appendix 2 - Practice Leadership (an externally published commentary by Ofsted, following the practice leadership visits to ourselves and four local authorities)

Sir Michael Wilshaw introduces a commentary about practice leadership, written by Eleanor Schooling, Ofsted's National Director of Social Care.

Introduction by Sir Michael Wilshaw

I have spoken time and again about the paramount importance of strong leadership in schools. The same is, of course, equally vital for those who lead children's services.

The value of good leadership, with a firm basis on professional practice, can't be understated. It is instrumental in creating the right culture for high-quality social work to thrive, in turn ensuring the best outcomes for children and families. This is just one of the themes I will discuss in my forthcoming Social Care Annual Report, published later this month.

In this commentary, which focuses on children's social care, Eleanor Schooling, Ofsted's National Director for Social Care, expands on this. She examines what has come to be known as 'practice leadership', looking at the attributes that make the best, most effective children's services leaders.

Practice leadership, by Eleanor Schooling

'Practice leadership' may be a term familiar to those in the social work profession, but what does this really mean? What qualities make the best leaders in the tough, high-profile world of children's services and child protection?

It's a question that all local authorities must ask themselves if they are to provide the best possible help, care and protection for children.

The Department for Education defines 'practice leaders' as "qualified social workers with the day-to-day operational responsibility across the whole local system for child and family social work practice". The [Knowledge and Skills Statement](#) further sets out the attributes that will eventually be used to accredit such leaders.

The qualities that make a successful children's services leader aren't straightforward to define – but inspections show that they're very obvious when present – and strikingly so when they aren't.

It isn't just a question of good leadership and management skills, although these must be present in abundance. Like all good leaders, social work practice leaders are inspirational and influential. They are energetic, visible, and ensure that they are surrounded by a strong team at every level.

Our inspectors made 5 good practice visits to some good and outstanding local authorities: Kensington and Chelsea, Leeds, Trafford and Hackney, as well as Cafcass (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service), to see what this looks like on the ground.

What is clear is that there is no one model, structure, or magic formula that is guaranteed to deliver strong effective children's services leadership. However, in all of these high performing areas, the same key elements and approaches stand out.

Understanding good social work

To be a good practice leader in children's social services, a deep knowledge and understanding of social work practice are crucial. In the areas we visited, leaders know what good social work practice looks like, both in principle and on the front line. They seek out innovative and best practice, so that they can harness this in their own services and share with others.

This expertise, based on first-hand experience and research, enables them to develop ambitious ideas for delivering outstanding services, and gives them added credibility within their workforce.

Effective leaders are in touch with the frontline. Leaders we spoke to know their staff by name, and the families they were working with (particularly in the most complex cases). This gives staff confidence. One social worker said "They [senior leaders] make it their business to know about all children".

Understanding frontline pressures, and making sure that these are mitigated, is a priority for leaders in all areas – 'manageable' caseloads a watchword. Social workers' caseloads are closely guarded, allowing more time for each case and ensuring that the right support is in place from the start.

One social worker said, "We know we have smaller caseloads, but that comes with higher expectations. We maybe keep them [cases] open longer, but that helps avoid re-referrals, and we are still very busy!"

Crucially, the needs of children are put first, and resources second. An assistant director told us, "I don't want to hear about resources, that's for us [senior leaders]. I want to hear about children's needs... I don't want to hear 'I need a residential place' – I want to hear about individual needs".

Passionate and courageous

It goes without saying that children's services leaders must be passionate, with a relentless focus on the needs of children, listening to and acting on their views. In the best authorities, leaders inspire the same enthusiasm and dedication throughout their staff at every level. As one senior leader we spoke to said, "Everyone from top to bottom really cares about the child."

Leaders should also have an innate understanding of the environment they work in, and be prepared to go into battle for children's services. In my view, there's no place in this work for 'corporate players' if this takes away from the resolute focus on children. The strongest leaders aren't afraid to rock the boat. They don't capitulate or appease those higher up in the chain – the needs of children and families are prioritised at all times.

Good practice leaders also recognise a wider obligation to drive improvement beyond their own organisation. For example, senior leaders from Leeds and in Kensington and Chelsea have both partnered authorities, rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted, to help them improve.

Workforce development

High-quality social work needs investment in people. While the challenges facing authorities in recruiting and retaining a skilled and competent workforce are well-documented, practice leaders find ways of overcoming this.

In our good practice authorities, leaders focused on developing their workforce, with clearly defined, effective, talent management, and opportunities for career progression. Leaders create opportunities for the workforce to reflect routinely on practice, recognising that this facilitates continuous learning and improvement.

Clear expectations for staff to develop professionally are key. Experienced social workers are given opportunities for promotion and advancement while remaining in practice, for example by being allocated very small caseloads while having the opportunity to mentor and support less experienced staff. Having achieved a stable workforce, leaders then focus on recruiting newly qualified staff and developing them, "growing their own".

Alongside this, the health and well-being of staff is a priority, with high-quality supervision and clinical support and a positive working environment. Staff felt valued and invested in, proud to work for the authority and committed to staying.

One social worker told us, "I would have left if there hadn't been the progression [to this role] – the career pathway is really important in keeping people."

Culture

It's obvious that individual influential and decisive leaders are essential to any organisation. But in my view, most crucial for children's services are those who not only create – but sustain – positive systems and organisational culture. The 'golden thread' of a clearly thought-out, coherent, vision must be evident both strategically and operationally.

In the successful authorities we looked at, a strong culture of leadership that extends throughout the whole organisation is clear. This is reflected in effective management teams and clear evidence of 'grip' at every level. In well-led organisations, frontline social workers know where the organisation is going, with clear direction and values.

At all levels of the organisation, inspectors saw a recognition that 'good' and 'outstanding' services can only be maintained through a constant desire to improve and relentless pursuit of excellence. One senior leader commented that this drive for continuous improvement was motivated not by Ofsted, but by wanting to achieve better outcomes for children and families.

Inspectors saw a culture of high challenge and high trust that enables social workers to strive for excellence. Staff are both challenged and supported to take appropriate risks, while leaders take responsibility for what happens on their watch. Social workers we spoke to described an environment where they feel confident and supported to make decisions, without managers seeking to apportion blame when things go wrong.

One social worker told us, "...risk is not only held by me, it's shared – real team work – it's what we do", while another said, "I feel supported and protected by my managers – we need challenge in order to develop".

Good practice leaders create a culture that questions, evaluates, and reflects, and where staff feel secure enough in their positions to drop their defences and be open about areas for improvement.

Structure

While practice leaders are senior social workers responsible for running the operational system, inspectors found that they can be located at different levels within an organisation, and aren't confined to a specific job title or role – assistant director, national director, or head of service are all examples.

Distributed leadership is also a feature of the areas we looked at, which means that high expectations are embedded across the organisation, rather than in one individual.

Visibility and accessibility of practice leaders are important, and although co-location can help, this isn't essential. Even the largest organisations can overcome distance through the imaginative use of technology. For example Cafcass, a national organisation, uses technology to ensure that the chief executive can attend several team meetings a day via video conferencing. As one senior leader put it, "...it's about culture and relationships, not geography".

Conclusion

There's no secret formula when it comes to leadership of children's services, rather a collection of attributes which when put together, create an environment that allows good social workers to do what they do best. Children in these places are well-cared for as a direct result.

The past decade has been a turbulent one for children's social care and the waters are certain to remain choppy, with increasing demand for services, less resource, and the continued high-profile nature of the business. Despite this, it's clear that there are areas with exceptional practice leaders that are working well for children, young people, and their families. They demonstrate what can be done.