

London Borough of Southwark

Children's Social Care

Quality Assurance Framework

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1. What is Quality Assurance?

We have an obligation to ensure that the services we are providing are making a positive difference to outcomes for children and families. Critical reflection and analysis are key elements of delivering an effective social work service.

Quality Assurance activities and the learning that arises are central to understanding how effective the services we provide are, and how we improve them. It is essential that, at all levels of our organisation, we are undertaking activities that monitor and evaluate quality of practice and service delivery.

Quality Assurance includes all activity that contributes to service learning and improvement. Southwark is committed to achieving excellence through continual improvement, where children and their families are at the centre of everything that we do and they influence and shape the services they receive.

Quality Assurance requires thinking about the 'here and now' for children, young people and their families, but also building an understanding of the child's journey within and between services – asking what has gone before and thinking about what might happen in the future.

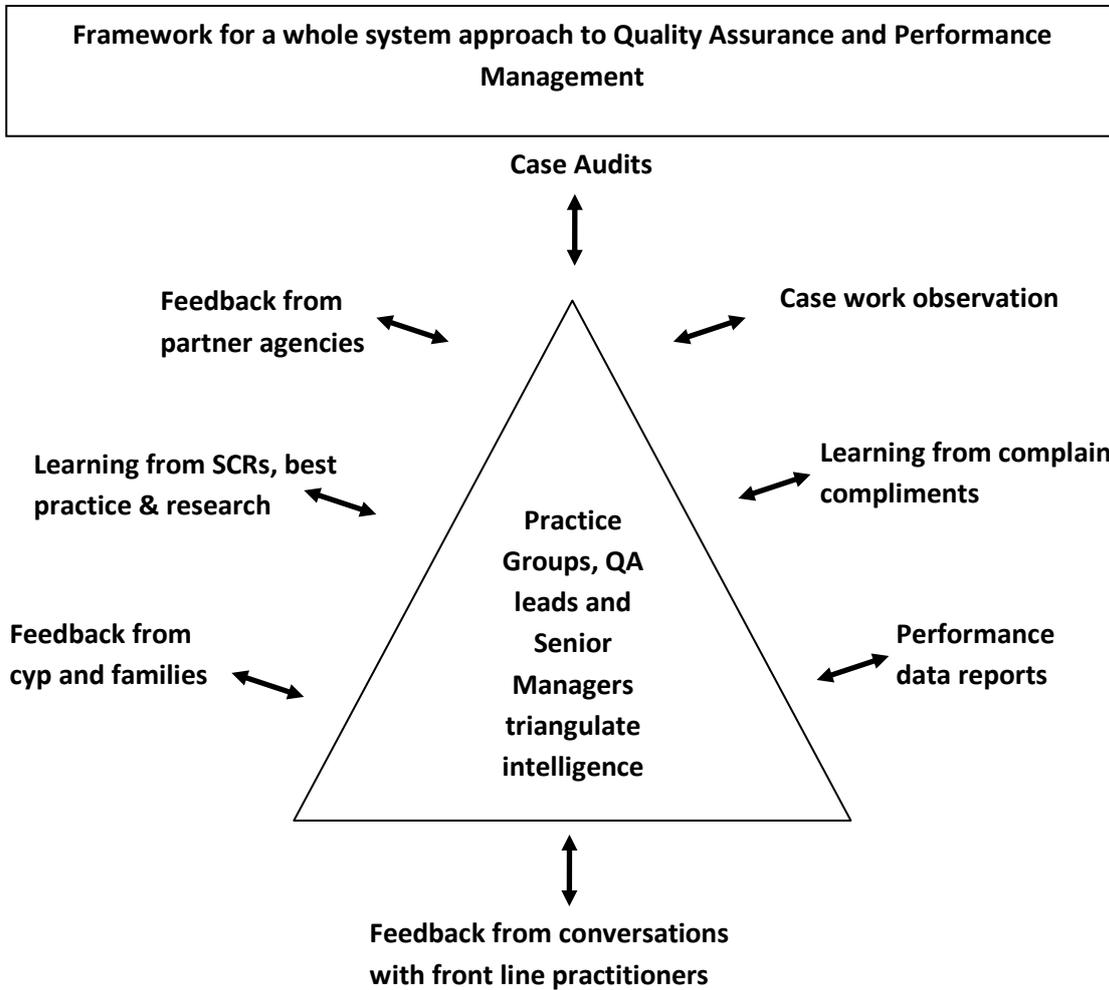
The Children's work force needs to be part of a learning organisation so areas for improvement are quickly and continuously identified, and learning from success is shared. Our approach to Quality Assurance will be:

- Standards based and outcome focused
- Informed by reflective discussion with social work practitioners and feedback from children and families
- Make use of the learning that arises to secure improvement in practice and performance by building on areas of strength and addressing areas for development

The primary challenge of quality assurance is to improve the quality of practice in order to improve outcomes for children, embedding a culture of quality assurance firmly and instinctively in practice is at the foundation of Social Work Matters in Southwark. Therefore, quality assurance must be strongly linked into effective mechanisms for achieving change and be able to demonstrate measurable improvements for children and families.

A systems approach forms the theoretical basis of Social Work Matters and relies on

us capturing and applying learning and best practices as they develop within the practice groups and across the wider system. There are several key components to the whole system approach to Quality Assurance and Performance Management.



It is important to define what is meant by “system”. This term is often taken to mean “policies” or “procedures” and a systems approach encompasses much more than this. The systems that determine performance are many and include procedures and processes; human factors as they apply to individuals, teams and leadership; the working environment and the pressures placed upon it; equipment used to accomplish tasks and less tangible but significant elements such as organisational culture.

Close links between front-line practice, the information we gather and the analysis of that information is crucial if we plan to address hard to solve practice problems and keep the work we do with families at the forefront.

Quality Assurance:

- is best measured by what outcomes are achieved for children
- needs to include the voice of children and parents/carers
- must lead to change and improvement in practice
- is at the heart of social work delivery is a relationship between social worker and child and parents: our processes need to enhance and promote the quality and effectiveness of these relationships
- is good staff support, clear direction and a management culture that cultivates, values and promotes professional judgement and reflection is essential to achieving better outcomes for children.
- Practice Groups, individual workers and their managers, ultimately have the solutions to improving practice, but may need resources and support to achieve it.
- Practice does not take place in a vacuum. A whole system approach is needed to support good practice and enable teams to deliver quality care

Ownership:

- Achieving good outcomes for children is everyone's responsibility
- Quality assurance needs to be embedded primarily in frontline teams and led by Advanced Practitioners and Practice Group Leads
- Good leadership by the Advanced Practitioner and engagement of the Practice Group is the key to achieving better performance
- Performance needs to be reported at Practice Group level so that teams can own the results and address them
- Quality assurance needs to be robust and independently verified to bring healthy challenge

Transparency

- Staff need to feel confident in reporting when things are going wrong
- Senior Managers must be receptive to hearing about problems and assertive in resolving them as quickly as possible
- Constructive challenge across the service should be encouraged and valued
- There should be no surprises
- Practice Observation must form the core of our approach

Quarterly Performance and Quality Meetings

On a quarterly basis Operational Leads for Children's Services, Strategy Planning and Performance leads responsible for performance management information, and the Head of the Quality Assurance and Social Work Improvement, meet to review performance and audit findings, including service user and staff feedback. The

purpose of these meetings is to drive up standards and outcomes for children, young people and their families, by challenge, scrutiny and sharing of learning. The meetings are chaired by the Director of Children's Social Care and reported to the Executive Director and Lead Member.

2. Responsibility for Quality Assurance

Assuring high quality practice is everyone's responsibility and the mechanisms to do so need to be embedded throughout the organisation, in order to actively encourage accountability by those involved in supporting families to change.

The activity of Southwark's Children's Services is subject to national and local standards. Our overall performance is measured against externally reported performance indicators that identify areas of strength and areas for development. We know through regularly monitoring and comparing performance management information, it is possible to identify themes and trends in practice. Further analysis of themes, and testing these through triangulation, can provide a greater understanding of potential impact and enable the early mitigation of risk.

Qualitative information needs to be understood alongside the quantitative data available to provide an effective and improving service, everyone in the organisation needs to be thinking about what they and others are doing and what impact this is having on children, young people and their families, and how things might be done better.

Professional standards are informed by statutory guidance and regulation and are grounded in the evidence of what works. Southwark is a partner of Research in Practice, to which all staff have free access to support our expectation that our professional practice is grounded in current knowledge.

All staff and managers have a responsibility to make sure the performance information and record keeping on the case recording system is accurate and up to date. In addition to being the source for data to support strategic performance management reports, and returns to Central Government, the electronic children's social care recording system also provides operational data that managers can use to monitor and evaluate the performance of their team and team members in relation to key activities.

There are various opportunities individual cases to verify quality (e.g. supervision, management authorisation of assessments, child protection case conferences and CLA reviews, the respective panels for fostering and adoption etc.).

The Independent Reviewing Officers are directly accountable for the delivery of their statutory responsibilities as set out in the "IRO Handbook". The Child Protection Chairs are accountable for the quality of the decision making and planning for children in need of protection. Both are responsible for ensuring that children and young people are involved in decisions which affect them and that their wishes and feelings are properly taken into account.

Child Protection Case Conference Chairs (CPC's) and Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) play a key role in planning for both children who are subject of a child protection plan and those looked after, and checking the impact and quality of work undertaken with them. Their role is to make sure that the quality of single agency and multi- agency work:

- Is to a high standard, with the safety of children and young people at the centre of thinking and activity
- Adheres to statutory requirements and performance indicators are met
- Adheres to court directions as part of court orders
- Contain plans that are based on clear outcomes, timescales, with lead accountabilities understood
- Plans are progress checked against outcomes with clear contingency plans if outcomes are not met

The Head of Quality Assurance and Social Work Improvement quality assures practice by ensuring; regular observations of CPCs chairing Child Protection Case Conferences, and IRO's chairing reviews.

There is a programme of observation of child protection conferences, the CPC's themselves also undertake two peer observations of practice in the chairing of Child Protection Case Conferences, and arrangements for a reciprocal peer observation model are being developed with a neighbouring London Borough.

The Head of Quality Assurance and Social Work Improvement produces an annual IRO report which is presented to the Children's and Adults Management Board, Corporate Parenting Committee, the Southwark Safeguarding Children Board and the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny.

An annual Child Protection Chairs report and LADO report is presented to the Children's and Adults Management Board, Southwark Safeguarding Children's Board and Children Services Overview and Scrutiny.

Child Protection Chairs and IROs meet monthly with social work Advanced Practitioners and Practice Group Leads to consider and address practice and quality issues. Particular attention is paid to care planning timescales for children and young people, but this is also an opportunity to reflect and take action on other practice quality issues. The service also prepares a bi-monthly report which highlights the activity and set out specific practice issues. This report is shared and discussed with the service through the Management Team.

Planning Resolution Processes

CPC's and IROs have a central role to provide support and challenge to the people involved in the life of a child or young person who is subject to a Child Protection Plan or looked after by Southwark, to make sure that they are being well and safely cared for, and that their wishes and feelings are taken into account at all times.

CPC's and IROs identify good practice as well as things that need to be improved. Areas of improvement are pursued with tenacity until they are resolved. Situations involving the safety of children and young people, or anyone else, will be escalated immediately and not delayed.

Sometimes the CPC or IRO may enter into disagreement with the responsible social worker in relation to aspects of the care planning for a child or young person. In such circumstances it is essential to get the care plan back on track.

CPC's and IROs will seek to resolve disputes at the earliest opportunity through discussion with the responsible social worker or advanced practitioner where possible. When a timely resolution cannot be achieved this should be escalated to the Practice Group Lead and if necessary thereafter to the Head of Service and Director of Social Care.

Feedback from children and young people, parents and carers

The views and wishes of service users are central to quality assurance and inform service development and improvement in Southwark. The involvement of children, young people, parents and carers is central to providing a good quality service. This should be understood in terms of:

- making sure their voice is heard – understanding their world (making it possible for them to attend and if they cannot or do not wish to attend, making sure their views and experiences are well represented and taken into account)
- making sure their views and experience of our work with them is understood and heard

Making sure that the views of children, young people, their parents and carers are considered at all meetings we hold with them, about the services they receive and the impact these have on their lives are sought and gathered in a number of ways:

- Talking with members of their Practice Group
- Talking with the IRO or CPC before, during and after LAC reviews and Child Protection Case Conferences
- Attendance at meetings (LAC reviews, Child Protection Case Conferences, CIN meetings)
- Completing feedback forms
- Complaints and Compliments monitoring
- Encouraging all looked after children to share their views and experiences with peers through the Children in Care Council

In Southwark advocacy for children in need and looked after children is provided by Barnados. The Children's Rights Officer coordinates and supports activity around participation with children, young people and families. This means expertise on participation is available throughout Children's Social Care. The Children's Rights Officer produces a quarterly report for Children's Services senior Management Team.

The Southwark Pledge sets out our commitments to Children Looked After and Children Leaving Care. Speakerbox (the Children in Care Council) is made up of young people in care and care leavers, and leads consultation projects with children about their experience in Local Authority care and feeds back findings to Councillors, senior managers, and Practice Group Leads as well as attending the Scrutiny Committee with the Annual Report for the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Speakerbox leads consultations with children from the age of five to twenty four who have been in care, and undertakes peer to peer telephone interviews, postal surveys, visits to residential homes and secure accommodation capturing a significant proportion of the looked after children population.

The Corporate Parenting Board consults with children and young people through the Children in Care Council Speakerbox.

Complaints monitoring for Children's Social Care

This is a function provided under Regulation 13 of the Children Act 1989 and the Representation Procedure 2006. The complaints manager monitors the complaints system and will raise issues requiring immediate attention with the relevant manager identifying actions that needs to be implemented within the service plan. The complaints service produces quarterly and annual reports on complaints themes and recommendations.

3. Audit Arrangements

The purpose of audit is to examine the quality of our work with children and families against practice standards to identify strengths and areas for development within teams and services. The progress on recommendations, actions and outcomes from all types of audit work will be kept under continuous review from the completion of the audit with an expectation that all identified areas for improvement are completed.

Single Case File Audits

Completed monthly by each service, co-ordinated by the Quality Assurance lead.

The audit process includes Social Worker to reflect on their case work by using the Audit Case File Reflection Sheet, and parental feedback.

The audit tool includes an improvement plan to address issues identified through the audit. The improvement plan is shared with the professional responsible for overseeing the plan for the child and is assiduously followed up by the case accountable professionals.

The Quality Assurance Leads ensure that quantitative and qualitative outcomes from the single case file audits are reported to the social work management teams regularly. . Action Planning in response to findings will be the responsibility of the Service Management team to implement, and key strategic issues will be addressed through the Southwark Achieving Excellence Development Plan.

See Appendix 1 for audit guidance

'Deep Dive' Audits

These will be focussed audits of a specific aspect of our work with children and families and will be determined by questions raised by our analysis of what the data is telling us triangulated with the themes emerging from the other elements of our quality assurance activity . These will be undertaken at any point on a child's journey through our services.

Service Specific Audits

Each service will set out a forward plan of audits.

Observations of Practice

In addition to the routine arrangements that are in place within each service for managers to observe practice, senior managers will take part in a schedule of observations of front line practice and report on their observations to contribute to service improvement.

Multi-agency Case Audit (MACA)

The Southwark Safeguarding Children Board Audit and Learning sub-group coordinates and reviews multi-agency audit and learning, providing a forum for shared multi-agency discussion, reflection and learning, supporting effective working between agencies

This involves bringing together representatives from member agencies to look in detail at sample cases. The purpose of this process is to secure learning and improvement by identifying issues to sustain and develop high quality services for children, young people and their families, in Southwark.

Audit outcomes will be disseminated by members of the Safeguarding Children Board through their respective organisations, followed up by the Audit and Learning sub-group action plans to make sure they are done and having an impact.

Case reviews led by the Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review sub-group

The Serious Case Review sub-group of the Safeguarding Children Board undertakes reviews of cases that either meet the criteria for a Serious Case Review or were a “near miss” and can help the partnership identify key learning through the commissioning of an independent management review.

The sub-group will compile a report of key findings and learning with an action plan which is reported to the Safeguarding Children Board. The sub-group then monitors the implementation of the actions in the organisation.

A summary of key learning practice points is disseminated through the Annual Service Day and other existing communication networks.

4. Governance of Quality Assurance

The Executive Director and the Senior Management Team

The role of the Director of Children's Services is set out in the Statutory Guidance www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/statutory

The senior management team, led by the Executive Director, oversees the operational function of LB Southwark Children's Social Care by receiving information on service quality and performance and making sure services are effective, keeping children and young people safe, and improving outcomes.

The Southwark Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB)

The responsibilities of the Safeguarding Children Board are set out in Statutory Guidance, including Working Together 2013.

The SSCB coordinates what is undertaken by each organisation represented on the SSCB, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Southwark, and to evaluate and ensure the effectiveness of what is done by each organisation. The SSCB is chaired by an Independent Chair who provides challenge to all member agencies in accordance with Working Together 2013.

The local authority Chief Executive, holds the Chair and the board to account for the quality of the SSCB's planning and the meeting of its objectives.

Role of the Lead Member for Children's Services

The role of the Lead Member for Children's Services is set out in the Statutory Guidance www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/statutory

The Lead Member has political responsibility for the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of local authority children's services, providing strong strategic leadership and support and challenge to the Director of Children's Services and relevant members of their senior team as appropriate.

The Lead Member is a "participating observer" of the Southwark Safeguarding Children Board, engaging in discussions but not part of the decision making process in order to maintain the necessary independence to challenge the DCS and others when necessary.

The Lead Member of LB Southwark Children's Social Care meets regularly with the Strategic Director of Children's Services and the Chief Executive on a one to one basis where matters of concern can be discussed. The Lead Member is democratically accountable to local communities and has a key role in defining the local vision and setting political priorities for children's services within the broader political context of the council.

APPENDIX 1

Single Case Audit

Procedure and Guidance Notes

1. Why auditing is important

1.1 Audits make an important contribution to service improvement by testing the quality of professional practice against agreed standards and ensuring that areas for improvement are identified and actions are taken to improve our work with children and families in Southwark. Auditing is an essential professional activity and should be used as part of the professional management and supervision of teams and individual workers.

1.2 The case audit process should raise practice standards by providing the opportunity for managers and practitioners to reflect on practice and measure the effectiveness of our work with children and families and it is important that audits focus on what good practice looks like, supporting staff and team development.

1.3 Audits provide an opportunity for learning and embedding a culture of continuous improvement, as part of the audit process Social Workers complete an Audit Case Reflection Sheet. This makes sure that the views of Social Workers are included within the audit process and reflective learning is encouraged.

1.4 The audit process should encourage dialogue between the auditor and practitioner, the aim is for managers and practitioners to be open to scrutiny and challenge and accountable for their actions but it is important for this to be done in a way that can be heard and received so that everyone works to improve the service we deliver to children and families.

1.5 The Service will use the outcomes of audits, alongside performance information and other sources of feedback to improve the quality of our service and to focus on securing good outcomes for children and families.

2. Monthly Service Audits

a) At the agreed date each month, cases will be selected for audit by the Performance Team. The Performance Team will select one case for every practice group and identify cases using the Ofsted criteria. The monthly audit activity will be co-ordinated within each service by the Quality Assurance Lead who will analyse the audit findings and submit a formal report to the Strategy, Planning and Performance Team. These service audit reports will be considered at the quarterly Performance and Quality Meetings, and areas for development identified will be included in the Achieving Excellence Plan. This process should not delay any case specific actions identified through audit from being progressed, and it is expected that these will form part of supervision discussions to ensure timely action.

b) The audit should cover the last 12 months of Social Care involvement.

- c) The social worker's case reflection sheet should be discussed with the social worker by the auditor
- d) The auditor will also make telephone contact with the family to complete a structured questionnaire.
- e) It is critical that any required actions are recorded on the electronic case file and that actions are completed in an agreed timescale.
- f) It is expected that all audits will be completed within the given timescale, with the only exception being if a request for an exemption is made by the Head of Service due to the person being on annual or sick leave.
- g) If any immediate concerns arise in respect of the child's safety during the course of an audit being completed then the auditor is responsible for ensuring that the appropriate people are notified as a matter of urgency, so that action is taken to make sure the child is safe. This will always include the Director of Children's Social Care.
- h) The Quality Assurance Lead for each service will track the implementation of the improvement plans, as well as highlighting and acknowledging outstanding and good practice and audits completed that are of a high quality.
- i) It is expected that Heads of Service will make arrangements to discuss a sample of the cases audited with the social workers and managers in the month following the audit
- j) A copy of the single case audits and improvement plan will be sent to the involved Independent Reviewing Officer or Child Protection Co-ordinator. This is to make sure that they are aware of the case being audited and take into account the audit findings and any actions identified.
- k) The audit findings will be collated for each service area by the Quality Assurance Lead and a report returned to the Strategy Performance and Planning Team. This information will then be presented to the quarterly Performance and Quality meetings for monitoring and action.

4. In completing your audit please consider the following:

Case Information

- Is the information on the child and their family, professional network complete and up to date?

Current Referral Information

- Is there clear understanding and reason for Social Care involvement?

Assessment and analysis of need

- Have risk and protective issues been explored and is reflected analytically in the assessment?
- Is there evidence of the use of research and theories to underpin practice?
- Are there observational recordings and views of parent/child relationship?
- Family history and have extended family members been included in the assessment process?
- Whether sufficient attention has been given to the child's race, culture, language, religion and is this evident in the planning? How cultural norms within families and factors such as social isolation, poverty and employment being considered in assessing risk and circumstances of child.
- Have assessments included family's views and demonstrate an understanding of the issues in relation to social care's involvement, and what is expected of them. Also whether there is evidence the assessment has been shared with the family?
- Is there evidence of multi-agency contribution to assessment process helping to inform and determine plans and actions to be undertaken?

Planning for child

- What is the quality of planning?
- Are key meetings held in timescale?
- The overall effectiveness of meetings (CP, CIN, CIC) do they address risk and is the plan likely to reduce harm.
- Is the level of social work intervention appropriate in relation to the presenting concerns and is the allocated worker working with the family in a planned and purposeful way?
- Do the plans meet the child's identified needs?
- How well are actions progressed?
- Is there evidence of involvement of parents and child/young person?
- Is the parent's capacity to improve addressed?

- How effective are the reviewing arrangements and the involvement of child/parent within this? (CIN: first review within 3 months of the initial CIN plan and then six monthly; CP: ICPC to take place within 15 working days of strategy discussion and 1st review conference should be held within 3 months and then at six monthly intervals; CIC: 1st review within 4 weeks of child becoming looked after, 2nd review within three months and then six monthly).
- Is there evidence of good multi-agency working?

Child Focus

- Is there evidence of engagement between the social work and child?
- Is a sense of the child's world evidenced?
- Is there an understanding of the child's needs recorded (physical, emotional and development).
- Is the appropriate level of contact maintained?
- Children are communicated with according to their needs.
- Has the child been seen alone, with their wishes and feelings recorded.
- Direct work is being undertaken and that the child is involved where appropriate in planning.

Recording

- Records are up to date, accurate and child centred.
- Case summaries are completed and there is a chronology and genogram which "tell the story" of the child and provide a sense of case history and the significant events.
- What is the quality of written records and reports are they analytical and distinguish between fact and opinion?
- Do the records demonstrate the decision making process?
- For CLA cases are copies of legal order evident, birth certificate and photo available.
- Practice demonstrates an awareness of requirements re legal, data protection and freedom of information.

Management oversight

- Is there evidence of managing practice with key decisions being made within supervision?
- Is there evidence that actions arising from case supervision have been progressed?
- For reports/plans/assessments have been read and counter signed by Team Manager.
- Is there evidence that poor practice is being challenged and monitoring implementation of actions identified?
- Is there evidence of management oversight/auditing of practice?
- What is the quality and frequency of supervision and is it reflective?

Any comments and reasons for judgement column in the audit tool

- To identify good or poor practice and include the reasons for particular judgements awarded.

Improvement Plan

- Identify any actions required to bring about improvement, this should be brief and specific, detailing who is to undertake action and the timescale for completion.

5. The Ofsted grade descriptors for the quality of practice

5.1 Key judgement: The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Children and young people who are, or who are likely to be, at risk of harm or who are the subject of concern are identified and protected. Help is provided early in the emergence of a problem and is well coordinated and recorded through multi-agency arrangements. Thresholds between early help and statutory child protection work are appropriate, understood and operate effectively. Records of action and decision are clear and up to date. Children and young people are listened to and heard. Social workers build effective relationships with them and their families in order to assess the likelihood of, and capacity for, change. Risk is well understood, managed and regularly reviewed. Children and young people experience timely and effective multi-agency help and protection through risk-based assessment, authoritative practice, planning and review that secures change.

A local authority is likely to be judged good if:

- Children and young people are listened to, practice is focused on their needs and experiences and influenced by their wishes and feelings or, where they cannot represent their view themselves, those advocated on their behalf. They are consistently seen and seen alone by social workers where statutory guidance requires that this should happen and it is professionally judged to be in the best interests of the child.
- Children, young people and families benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with social workers. They are engaged in all actions and decisions and understand the intentions of the help they receive. Where families refuse to engage there are continued attempts to help them to do so. However, where there are concerns about the safety and protection of children and parents do not engage, there is a full risk assessment and urgent involvement of a senior manager in all decisions about next steps.
- Children, young people and families are offered help when needs and/or concerns are first identified and, as a consequence of the early help offered, children's circumstances improve and, in some cases, the need for targeted services is lessened or avoided. The interface between early help and statutory child protection work is clearly and effectively differentiated.
- Information-sharing between agencies and professionals is timely, specific and effective and takes full account of the requirements set out in legislation and guidance about the need to obtain parental consent for enquiries to be made, except where in seeking that consent a child is likely to suffer significant harm or further harm.
- Children and young people in need of help and protection are identified by professionals, including those in adult services, and appropriate referrals are made to children's social care. Social work expertise and advice is available to support other professionals in determining the best steps to take next. There is a timely and effective response to referrals, including out of normal office hours.
- Thresholds for intervention accord with the requirements of legislation, are appropriate, understood by partners, consistently applied, well embedded, reviewed and updated regularly. Drift and delay are avoided.
- Children and young people receive help that is proportionate to risk; children and families are not routinely subjected to formal child protection investigations if these are not necessary.
- Child protection enquiries are thorough and timely, informed by a decision made in a strategy meeting, except in emergencies where there must be evidence of immediate risk of harm to a child, and always led by a suitably qualified and experienced registered social worker. Findings in relation to significant harm are clear and result in urgent action to protect children and young people.
- Decision-making is undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and managers, with decisions, all actions and engagement with the family and other professionals clearly recorded.

- For children who need help and protection, assessments (including common or early help assessments) are timely, proportionate to risk, and informed by research and by the historical context and significant events for each case. They result in direct work with families, develop in response to that direct work, and they address all domains of the local framework for assessment. Senior managers have responsibility for authorising the recommended next steps.
- Assessments (including children in need assessments) result in a direct offer of help to address any identified needs. Assessments and plans are dynamic and change in the light of emerging issues and risks. Authoritative action is taken where change is not secured and the risk to children intensifies or remains.
- Children in need have a plan setting out the help that is offered. Children and young people who need protection are subject to a child protection plan that clearly identifies the work that will be offered to help the family and the necessary changes to be achieved within appropriate timescales for the child or young person. Social workers engage with the family who understand the help they will receive, what has to change and the options for the future.
- Plans and decisions are reviewed and alternative authoritative action is taken where the circumstances for children do not change and the risk of harm or actual harm remains or intensifies.
- Children and young people are protected through effective multi-agency arrangements. Case conferences, strategy meetings, core groups and multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) are attended by key participants and are effective forums for timely information-sharing, planning and risk-based decision-making.
- Children and young people who live in households where at least one parent or carer misuses substances or suffers from mental ill-health, or where there is domestic violence, are helped and protected. Incidents are monitored and multi-agency responses are effective and coordinated between agencies, including management through MARAC.
- Children and young people who are missing from home, care or full-time school education and those at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking receive well-coordinated responses that reduce the harm or risk of harm to them. Risks are well understood and minimised. Local authorities, schools and local police are aware of, and implement in full, the requirements of the statutory guidance for children and young people who are missing. Comprehensive records are held and shared between agencies to help and protect children and young people. Together they take steps to ensure that all children, including those who are excluded from school, are safe and that for those who are missing or often missing there is a clear plan of urgent action in place to protect them and to reduce the risk of harm or further harm.
- Children and young people who are privately fostered are identified by the local authority, in conjunction with partners. Once they are identified, the local authority discharges in full its statutory responsibility to ensure that they are safe and that their health and well-being are properly promoted.

- Allegations of abuse, mistreatment or poor practice by professionals and carers are taken seriously. Steps are taken to protect children and young people and the management of allegations is robust and effective.
- Practice is informed by feedback from children and their families about the effectiveness of the help, care or support they receive from the time it is first needed until it ends.
- Children, young people and families have timely access to, and use the services of, an advocate where appropriate.
- Help and protection for children and young people is sensitive and responsive to age, disability, ethnicity, faith or belief, gender, gender identity, language, race and sexual orientation.

Outstanding

- 'The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection' is likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a 'good' judgement, there is evidence that professional practice exceeds the standard of 'good' and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children, young people and their families. Research-informed practice, some of which will be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children and young people.

Requires improvement

- 'The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection' is likely to 'require improvement' if there are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm. However, the authority is not yet delivering good help and protection for children, young people and families.

Inadequate

- 'The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection' is likely to be inadequate if there are widespread or serious failures which leave children being harmed or at risk of harm.

5.2 Key judgement: The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Decisions about children and young people becoming looked after are made using high-quality assessments about the risk of harm or actual harm to them and the likelihood of change in their family. Thresholds are clear and applied appropriately. Children and young people are listened to by social workers who know them well. Adults working with children and young people help them to understand and manage their early childhood experiences, to progress well and achieve educationally, and to influence decisions about their future. They return home with the support they need and when it is safe for them. If this is not possible, they live in stable placements where they are helped to build positive relationships and maintain contact with their family and friends where this remains in their best interests. Care plans are regularly

reviewed to ensure that the child or young person's current and developing needs continue to be met.

Permanent homes and families are found for children and young people without unnecessary delay. Their needs are met and they live with their brothers and sisters if that is assessed as being in their best interests. They do not experience placement moves unless they are part of a planned return home or in accordance with plans for their future. Their education is not disrupted unless it is their best interests and plans for their schooling provide any extra help they need to make up time and learning that has been missed. They develop safe and secure relationships with adults that persist over time. When support is needed, children, young people and families are able to access it for as long as it is needed, throughout their childhood and beyond.

In making the 'children looked after and achieving permanence' judgement, inspectors will take into account their judgement on adoption performance and their judgement on the experiences and progress of care leavers.

A local authority is likely to be judged good if:

- Decisions to look after children and young people are timely and made only when it is in their best interests. Those decisions are based on clear, effective, comprehensive and risk-based assessments involving other professionals working with the family where appropriate.
- There is evidence of the effective use of the Public Law Outline, including letters before proceedings, family group conferences and parallel planning. Care is used only if this is in the child's best interests. Children and young people are safely and successfully returned home; where this is not possible for them, permanent plans are made for them to live away from the family home. Families are made aware of, and encouraged to access, legal advice and advocacy.
- Where the plan for a child or young person is to return home, there is evidence of purposeful work to help the family to change so it is safe for the child to return. Further episodes of being looked after are avoided unless they are provided as a part of a plan of support.
- Applications and assessments for care or other orders are accepted by the courts, minimise the appointment of experts and avoid unnecessary delay. The wishes and feelings of children and young people, and those of their parents, are clearly set out and contemporary. Viability assessments of members of the family are carried out promptly to a good standard and sequential assessments are avoided.
- Children and young people are seen by their social worker alone and understand what is happening to them. Professionals and carers, who know them well, develop positive relationships with them and are committed to protecting them and promoting their welfare. Children and young people are helped to understand their rights and the responsibilities that accompany those rights and legal entitlements. They understand how to complain and have access to an advocate and independent visitor. Complaints are treated seriously and result in a clear response,

urgent action and improved services where that is required. Senior managers regularly review and act upon complaints from looked after children.

- Children and young people are protected or helped to keep themselves safe from bullying, homophobic behaviour and other forms of discrimination.
- Any risks associated with children and young people offending, misusing drugs or alcohol, going missing or being sexually exploited are known by the local authority and by adults who care for them. There are plans and help in place that are reducing the risk of harm or actual harm and these are kept under regular review by senior managers.
- Children and young people are in good health or are being helped to improve their health and their health needs are identified. Child and adolescent mental health provision, therapeutic help and services for learning or physically disabled children and young people are available when needed and for as long as they are required.
- Children and young people attend school or other educational provision and they learn. Accurate and timely assessments of their needs, as well as specialist support where it is needed, help them to make good progress in their learning and development wherever they live. They receive the same support from their carers as they would from a good parent. The attainment gap between them and their peers is narrowing. The local authority maintains accurate and up-to-date information about how looked after children are progressing at school and takes urgent and individual action when they are not achieving well. All looked after children and young people attend a good school.
- Children and young people who do not attend school have access to 25 hours per week of good-quality registered alternative provision. They are encouraged and supported to attend the provision and there is regular review of their progress. Urgent action to protect children is taken where they are missing from school or their attendance noticeably reduces.
- The local authority holds clear records in respect of the numbers of children receiving alternative education and for those missing from education.
- Social workers, residential staff and carers support children and young people to enjoy what they do and to access a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. Those adults have delegated authority to make decisions about children's access to recreation and leisure activities.
- Children and young people live in safe, stable and appropriate homes or families with their brothers and sisters when this is in their best interests. They move only in accordance with care plans, when they are at risk of harm or are being harmed. They do not live in homes that fail to meet their needs and they do not move frequently.
- Care plans comprehensively address the needs and experiences of children and young people. They are regularly and independently reviewed, involving as appropriate the child or young person's parents, kinship carers (connected persons), foster carers, residential staff and other adults who know them. This helps ensure

that the placement and plans for their future continue to be appropriate as well as ambitious.

- Children and young people have appropriate, carefully assessed and supported contact with family and friends and other people who are important to them (applies to adoption judgement).
- Children and young people who live away from their 'home' authority have immediate access to education and health services that meet their needs as soon as they begin to live outside of their 'home' area. Placing authorities adhere to the requirements of the placement regulations including notifying the 'receiving' authority that a child is moving to the area and assessing the adequacy of resources to meet the child's need before the placement is made (applies to adoption judgement).
- The placement of children and young people into homes and families that meet their needs is effective because there is a comprehensive range and choice available (applies to adoption judgement).
- Family-finding strategies are informed by the assessed needs of children and young people. There is decisive action to find families and the avoidance of drift and delay is a priority. Respite care is only used when this is in the best interests of children and young people (applies to adoption judgement).
- The recruitment, assessment, training, support, supervision, review and retention of foster carers including kinship carers (connected persons) and, as appropriate, special guardians, ensures that families approved are safe and sufficient in number to care for children and young people with a wide range of needs. This enables children to be placed with their brothers and sisters and have contact with their birth family and friends when this is in their best interests.
- Children and young people whose care and support is provided through a 'social work practice' service receive the same high-quality help that they could expect from the social work service provided directly by a local authority.
- Early planning and case management results in appropriate permanent placements, including Special Guardianship or Residence Orders, that meet the needs of children and young people without delay or unnecessary moves (applies to adoption judgement).
- Well-trained and supported social workers engage effectively with the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), courts and other partners, including health professionals, to reduce any unnecessary delay in proceedings or in achieving permanence and to support arrangements once they are made (applies to adoption judgement).
- Children and young people are effectively prepared for, and carefully matched with, a permanent placement. Their wishes and feelings are understood and influence the decisions about where they live (applies to adoption judgement).
- Children and young people are helped to develop secure primary attachments with the adults caring for them. Social workers help them to understand their lives and their identities through life history work that is effective and provided when they

need it. Therapeutic materials are made available to the child and their family when and wherever the child is placed (applies to adoption judgement).

Plans to make permanent arrangements for children and young people are effectively and regularly reviewed by independent reviewing officers (IROs). IROs bring rigour and challenge to the care planning and monitor the performance of the local authority as a corporate parent, escalating issues as appropriate. They enable timely plans to be agreed to meet the needs of children and to ensure that their best interests remain paramount. IROs engage with children's guardians and there is evidence that this is focused on what children need and how the plans for them can be properly progressed (applies to adoption judgement).

Case records reflect the work that is undertaken with children and clearly relate to the plans for their futures. The style and clarity of records enhances the understanding that children and young people have about their histories and experiences.

Children and young people are represented by a Children in Care Council or similar body which is regularly consulted on how to improve the support they receive.

Children and young people receive care that is sensitive and responsive to age, disability, ethnicity, faith or belief, gender, gender identity, language, race and sexual orientation (applies to adoption judgement).

Outstanding

'The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence' is likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a 'good' judgement, there is evidence that professional practice exceeds the standard of 'good' and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children, young people and their families. Research-informed practice, some of which will be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children and young people.

Requires improvement

'The experiences and progress of children and young people looked after and achieving permanence' requires improvement when there are no widespread or serious failures or unnecessary delays that result in the welfare of looked after children not being safeguarded and promoted. However, the authority is not yet delivering good help and care for looked after children and young people and families.

Inadequate

'The experiences and progress of children and young people looked after and achieving permanence' is likely to be inadequate if there are widespread or serious failures, including unnecessary delay in identifying permanent solutions for them and which result in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

5.3 Adoption performance

Suitable adoptive families are identified without delay for all children for whom adoption is in their best interests. The recruitment and assessment arrangements are aligned with national systems and enable potential adopters to consider and to be considered for a wide range of children for whom they may provide a home. Children are able to develop safe and secure relationships with their adoptive family that persist over time. When support is needed, children, young people, families and carers are able to access it for as long as it is needed, throughout their childhood and beyond.

Adoption is likely to be judged good if the criteria identified in the earlier judgement for looked after children (where adoption is being considered or is the plan) are met and in addition:

- Adoption is considered for all children who are unable to return home or to their birth families and who need a permanent alternative home.
- The local authority demonstrates a sense of urgency and care in all adoption work including the appropriate use of concurrent and parallel planning, the Adoption Register and Fostering for adoption, resulting in children being able to live at the earliest opportunity with an adoptive family who are able to meet their needs.
- Recruitment, preparation, prompt assessment, training and support of adopters enables them to meet the needs of children and young people and to keep them safe. Those arrangements support the placement of children with their brothers and sisters where this is in their best interests and sufficient families are available to accommodate sibling groups, older children and children with complex needs.
- The panel and agency decision-maker ensure that children are effectively matched with the most appropriate families and the panel promotes good practice through its work and regular reports to the local authority.
- Children who are adopted, their adoptive families, their birth relatives and adopted adults are informed of their entitlement to receive an assessment of their adoption support needs. When support is needed, it is provided quickly, effectively and leads to improved circumstances for the children, young people, families and carers involved.

Outstanding

- Adoption performance is likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a 'good' judgement, there is evidence that professional practice is creative, innovative and leads to success in finding permanent adoptive families for children, including those with complex needs. The adoption agency uses nationally available systems to help maintain the interest and availability of potential adopters. Sustained improvement in the lives of children, young people and their families is supported through highly effective adoption support.

Requires improvement

Adoption performance requires improvement when there are no widespread or serious failures that result in children looked after who should be adopted not being adopted by a family who can meet their needs or within appropriate timescales. However, the characteristics of good are not in place.

Inadequate

Adoption performance is likely to be inadequate if there are widespread or serious failures that result in children looked after who should be adopted not being adopted by a family who can meet their needs in a timescale that meets their best interests.

5.4 The experiences and progress of care leavers

Young people leaving care and preparing to leave care receive support and help to assist them in making a successful transition to adulthood. Plans for them to leave care are effective and address their individual needs. They are safe and feel safe, particularly where they live. Young people acquire the necessary level of skill and emotional resilience to successfully move towards independence. They are able to successfully access education, employment, training and safe housing. They enjoy stable and enduring relationships with staff and carers who meet their needs.

When evaluating the experience and progress of care leavers, such as their successful transition to adulthood, inspectors will take into account the young person's development and achievements at the point they became looked after, the age they became looked after and the age they were when they became the responsibility of the authority being inspected.

The experiences and progress of care leavers is likely to be judged to be good if:

Care leavers are safe and feel safe, particularly where they are living, and are helped to understand how their life choices will affect their safety and well-being. Any risks associated with offending, drug or alcohol misuse, going missing or with sexual exploitation are known by adults who have a responsibility for them and effective plans are in place to reduce the risk of or actual harm to them. Care leavers are supported to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Pathway planning is effective and plans (including transition planning for looked after children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) address all young people's needs and are updated as circumstances change.

The health needs of care leavers are clearly assessed, prioritised and met. Child and adolescent mental health services, adult mental health provision, therapeutic help and services for learning or physically disabled young people and adults are available when they are needed.

- Care leavers have access to and understand their full health history and are provided with all key documents they need to begin their lives as young adults, for example national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports.
- Care leavers develop the skills and confidence they need to maximise their chances of successful maturity to adulthood, including parenthood. This includes learning to budget, to live independently and to manage safe relationships and behaviour. Care leavers form and maintain relationships with carers and staff from the local authority and develop supportive relationships within the community, including where appropriate contact with family and friends. They are confident that the local authority will act as a reasonable parent in supporting their transition into adulthood and providing practical, emotional and financial support until they are at least 21 and, where necessary, until they are 25. This will include the availability of a trusted and known adult (for example, the allocated personal adviser or their social worker) to support them.
- Care leavers succeed in their transition to greater independence and adulthood at a time that is right for them. Young people aged 16 and 17 are encouraged to remain looked after until their 18th birthday where (and this will usually be the case) this is in their best interest. They can remain in placements beyond their 18th birthday or, where more appropriate, live in permanent and affordable accommodation that meets their needs and those of their children, where relevant.
- Care leavers have access to appropriate education and employment opportunities, including work experience and apprenticeships. They are encouraged and supported to continue their education and training, including those aged 21 to 24 years. Care leavers are progressing well and achieving their full potential through life choices, either in their attainment in further and higher education or in their chosen career/occupation.
- Care leavers are positive about themselves. Their achievements are celebrated and the local authority shows they are positive and proud of their care leavers.
- Care leavers are helped to find housing solutions that best meet their needs. Risks of tenancy breakdown are identified and alternative plans are in place.
- Accommodation for care leavers is appropriate for each young person to safely develop their independence skills. Houses of multiple occupancy are only used when it is a young person's preferred option and it can demonstrably be shown to be in their best interests.
- Care leavers are provided with information (including through the care leaver's pledge) about their legal entitlements such as access to their records, assistance to find employment (including work experience), training, financial support and how to complain where necessary supported by an advocate.

Outstanding

- 'The experiences and progress of care leavers' is likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a 'good' judgement, there is

evidence that professional practice exceeds the standard of 'good' and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children, young people and their families. The local authority is ambitious and aspirational for its young people as they mature to adulthood. The authority is assertive and proactive in keeping in touch with all young people who have left care and, as a result, young people have a sense of security and connection with adults who they know well. Research-informed practice, some of which will be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children and young people.

Requires improvement

'The experiences and progress of care leavers' requires improvement when there is no widespread or serious failure that results in care leavers not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted but the characteristics of a 'good' judgement are not in place.

Inadequate

'The experiences and progress of care leavers' is likely to be inadequate if there is widespread or serious failure that results in care leavers not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.