

A DCS in every LA cannot be “taken for granted” as children’s services departments focus on back office savings

A DCS in every authority “cannot be taken for granted”, a survey by the Association of Directors of Children’s Services and the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services has found. The survey, published today, examines how local authorities are reacting to funding cuts within Children’s Services departments in local authorities. The survey reports that that local authority children’s services departments are reducing the number of senior and middle managers, including merging the role of the Director of Children’s Services with other director-level posts, and reorganizing back office services.

The survey, to which 58 authorities responded, shows that 33% of responding councils either had or were planning to review the post of the Director of Children’s Services. Options being considered include the merging of the role of the Director of Children’s Services with that for Adult Social Services; the inclusion of a number of other service areas, including housing and leisure services, within the joint remit; and the splitting of responsibility for children’s social care and education. This survey follows on from a similar project in November 2010 which found that a significant majority of authorities (80% of respondents) were considering the reorganization of children’s services.

The report also reveals changes to the way that services are delivered and supported. There has been a reduction in senior and middle managers and changes in their responsibilities to reflect a shift towards the commissioning, rather than direct provision of services for children and young people. Back office services such as resource management and human resources are increasingly being run corporately to save costs. The survey reveals some concerns that these changes might result in a lack of specialism in supporting, for example, the recruitment of social workers, or in a lack of accountability for commissioned services not provided directly by the local authority.

Matt Dunkley, President of ADCS said:

“As the report states, we can no longer take it for granted that every local authority in England will have a Director of Children’s Services as described in the legislation, with sole responsibility for education and children’s social care. It is understandable that, with budgets under pressure across public services, local authorities are looking for ways to focus their resources on the frontline by reviewing the role and number of senior managers and local authorities must have the freedom to decide the structures that best reflects the needs of their communities. Some of my colleagues with wider responsibilities, particularly in Unitary Authorities, report some benefits from aligning services for families under one Director

However, it would be remiss not to sound a note of caution – Professor Munro’s recent review of child protection warns against expanding the responsibilities of the DCS beyond the core remit of education and children’s social care. What is vitally important is that local authorities ask themselves serious questions about these arrangements, does this strengthen or dilute accountability for the outcomes achieved by children and young people locally and is this clear to local residents? Is the “spine of accountability” for Children’s safeguarding clear and transparent? Does it provide directors and lead members with the levers they need to build excellent services for families?”

Mr Dunkley continued,

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“There has been a lot of pressure on local authorities to focus on “back office” services when making reductions to their budgets. This survey shows that within children’s services this has certainly been the focus of efforts to cut costs, but that these reductions do carry risks in the quality of support being offered. Similarly Directors are clear that restructuring or moving to commissioning or shared services with other local authorities may not produce the savings required and cannot be the only answer. It is clear that these are long term solutions and will not remove the necessity to make some very difficult decisions about reductions to funding of frontline services.”

ENDS

Notes to editors

- 1)** The role of the Director of Children’s Services (DCS) was created by the Children Act 2004, which requires every local authority to have a single officer with responsibility for education and children’s social care. The statutory guidance on the role of the DCS is currently under review.
- 2)** Professor Munro’s final report of her review into the child protection system cautioned local authorities about the risks of giving the DCS wider responsibilities not directly related to children and young people. Professor Munro’s report can be found here:
- 3)** The Association of Directors of Children’s Services Ltd (ADCS) is the professional leadership association for Directors of Children’s Services and their senior management teams.

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