

# ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES LIMITED

## SAFEGUARDING PRESSURES PHASE 3 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND NARRATIVE

FINAL OCTOBER 2012

### 1. Introduction

Safeguarding related pressures on local authority children's services have been the subject of much discussion and media attention since the death of Peter Connelly in 2007. ADCS commissioned the first two phases of research in 2010 to explore the rise in safeguarding activity and evaluate the impact. There was evidence of increases in: initial contacts; referrals; children subjects of a child protection plan and children looked after. The increases appear to be the result of a wide range of reasons, some of which were positive, including better awareness amongst professionals, but also due to a rise in population, domestic abuse, and the economic downturn. In addition, the 2009/10 settlement for children's services was thought to be insufficient to meet increasing needs, with a 5.9% overspend forecasted across 43 authorities.

Now just over two years on from the first two phases of research into safeguarding pressures, local authorities continue to report further increases in safeguarding activity and associated pressures, and further research (Phase 3) has been undertaken to identify what changes have taken place in the past two years and what are the reasons, including a focus on permanency routes for children looked after.

Up to 115 (76%) local authorities responded to a request for data, providing children's social care data and qualitative information about changes to safeguarding activities within their authority. In addition, policy, legislative, social and economic factors which frame the ever more complex context in which safeguarding services are now planned and delivered were considered. These include marked changes to safeguarding policy and guidance following Prof. Eileen Munro's review of child protection; the Family Justice Review; early help; reforms in adoption, the health service and welfare benefits; as well as an increasing population will all have a considerable impact on children's services. Some of these factors will in time undoubtedly reduce the levels of, and need for safeguarding activity and more importantly they will improve outcomes for children, young people and their families, and they will do so even in the context of an increasing child population. Others of these factors could exacerbate levels of need as families struggle to cope with welfare reforms and the continued economic recession.

Moreover, the proposed changes to the practice of remanding young people to custody brought about by implementing the LASPO Act will also impact upon local authorities. The key changes are: the introduction of a single remand order for all young people; the transfer of responsibility for funding custodial remands to local authorities; a new, tougher test for courts to apply when considering a remand to custody; and giving looked after status to young people on custodial remand. This latter change will impact upon the numbers of children in care nationally and the costs of providing leaving care services for this new cohort will further increase the pressures on local authority budgets. The principle however of conferring looked after status on young people remanded to custody is right – they are vulnerable.

## 2. Key Findings

There continues to be an increase in safeguarding activity, although the variations in current rates and changes between local authorities are significant, particularly for initial contacts and referrals. Over a five year period, the rate of increase in safeguarding activity has been greater in the first three years (as reported in Phase 2) with some authorities now starting to show reducing numbers in the last two years. For example, 42% of local authorities experienced a decrease in the number of children subjects of child protection plans at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, but the increase overall in the year was 2.8%. Variances were also seen between authorities in the age of children and young people subjects of child protection plans (an overall increase in Under 4s and 16-17 year olds) but also more marked differences between authorities in their use of category of need/abuse.

There does not appear to be any correlation between increases or reductions in numbers of children subjects of child protection plans or children looked after.

Activity	Number of LAs	2010/11		2011/12		% change between 2010/11 and 2011/12	% change between 2007/8 and 2011/12
		Number of children	Rate <sup>1</sup>	Number of children	Rate <sup>1</sup>		
Initial Contacts	69	951,541	1,835	960,941	1,853	1.0%	51.5%
Referrals	88	367,573	555	361,712	546	-1.6%	15.2%
Becoming subject of CP Plan	106	34,787	43.0	37,546	46.5	7.9%	51.1%
Subject of a CP Plan at 31 Mar	106	30,020	37.7	30,860	38.8	2.8%	47.3%
Becoming Looked After	103	20,500	25.8	21,431	27.0	4.5%	29.9%
Looked After at 31 Mar	104	45,595	57.0	47,111	58.3	3.3%	11.6%

<sup>1</sup> Rate per 10,000 0-17 population, using ONS 2010 mid-year estimates, which are the latest available.

## **Initial Contacts and Referrals**

1,853 initial contacts per 10,000 0-17 population were received by responding authorities during 2011/12, with 89% of authorities reported an increase over five years. There were 546 referrals per 10,000 0-17 population in 2011/12, a very slight reduction on the previous year (555) although an increase over five years of 15.2% in responding authorities. For those authorities who have experienced a decrease in referrals, this could be early evidence of effective early help or early evidence of local authorities responding to Munro's recommendation of providing access to social work advice at the point of initial contact. The sources of initial contacts and referrals generally show a similar distribution in 2011/12 to that of five years ago. Exceptions are an increase in the proportion of initial contacts from health professionals (10.8% to 11.3%), but a decrease in the proportion of referrals from health (14.7% to 13.8%); an increase in the proportion of initial contacts from police (3.2 percentage points of total distribution); an increase in the proportion of referrals from education (from 11.7% to 14.3%) against a reduction in the proportion of both initial contacts and referrals that are from 'self, friend or family members'. Police remain the main source of both initial contacts and referrals.

In 2011/12, referrals for abuse or neglect (N1) continued to be the predominant reason for referral (44% of all referrals), and 'cases other than children in need' has shown a decrease from 6.7% to 1.9% of all referrals which may be linked to thresholds or what is considered a referral, but could also be a result of early intervention, improved data capture and recording of reasons for referrals.

## **Children Becoming Subjects of Child Protection Plans in the Year**

There were 46.5 children per 10,000 0-17 population becoming subjects of child protection plans between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012, an overall 7.9% increase on the previous year. Neglect remains the predominant category of abuse on initial plan (42.2% in 2011/12). There is an increase in the use of 'multiple' categories from 8.8% of all plans to 10.2% and whilst 48% of authorities use this category, the usage by a small number has increased significantly, this is most likely to be a reflection of the increasing complexity of cases as reported in the qualitative interviews for this research.

In the five years 2007/8 to 2011/12, there was an increase in the proportion of children becoming subjects of child protection plans who are under 1 (an increase from 16.1% to 20.4%) and 16+ (an increase from 0.5% to 1.9%). The same pattern can be seen in those who are subjects of child protection plans at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012.

## **Children Subjects of Child Protection Plans at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012**

There were 38.8 children per 10,000 0-17 population who were subjects of child protection plans at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 - a 2.8% increase on the previous year. The category of abuse has shown relatively little change over the last two years but some shift in five years with the same increase in the 'multiple' category and emotional abuse as for initial plans, but a decrease in proportion of children under the categories of sexual abuse.

## **Children Becoming Looked After During the Year**

There were 27 children becoming looked after per 10,000 0-17 population in 2011/12, an increase of 4.5% compared to the previous year. The distribution of children becoming looked after by category of need over the five years shows an increase or little change in most categories except absent parenting (N8) which has fallen and which accords with falling numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Neglect (N1) remains the largest category, in both absolute and relative terms.

## **Children Looked After at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012**

There were 58.3 children looked after per 10,000 0-17 population at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, a 3.3% increase on the previous year. Published data about looked after children excludes children accommodated under a series of short term breaks, the number of which reduced from 4,305 to 3,031 in responding authorities between 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012. This is interesting given that there has been a modest but steady increase on the percentage of children starting to be looked after by needs code 'child's disability'.

Analysis of those children looked after at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 shows that there was little change overall in the category of need of children looked after at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 compared to a year ago, apart from a one percentage point reduction in absent parenting (N8). This reduction is in line with a reduction in unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Abuse or neglect (N1) continues to be the main reason children are looked after. There is little significant change in the age breakdown of children looked after at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, with a slight increase in Under 1 and 5 – 9 age bands.

There are some changes on the previous year to proportion by legal status, including an increase in Placement Orders and slightly fewer children accommodated under Section 20. There does not appear to be an increase in the proportion of children looked after under an Interim Care Order or Full Care Order, which aligns with Department for Education (DfE) published data but not CAFCASS data or local authority reports of an increase in care proceedings.

63.3% of children looked after were placed with a foster carer other than with a relative or friend and there was a slight reduction in children placed at home from 5.9% to 5.2% of the total LAC population. The long term stability of placements indicator has dropped very slightly by 1.2 percentage points to 67.7% between 2010/11 and 2011/12 but overall placement stability has improved over the five year period.

Of the 429 children for whom the agency's decision to adopt had subsequently changed, the main reason (38%) was because 'prospective adopters could not be found' - almost double the rate of 21.1% in 2010. 6.8% (28 children) changed plans because 'the Court did not make a placement order' and 27.3% because 'the needs of the child changed'. Reasons provided by local authorities for the change in agency decisions include: not to separate siblings for whom 'whole sibling group' adopters could not be found; children whose needs, behaviour, or diagnoses had changed; alternative placements found with family members; carers of siblings wishing to pursue SGO rather than adoption; and children whose level of need, functioning or age proved to be a barrier. This shows clearly that a significant barrier to increasing rates of adoption is an insufficient supply of adopters in general and more specifically a paucity of prospective adopters willing and approved to adopt sibling groups.

### **Children Ceasing to be Looked After**

There are relatively small changes over the two years between proportions leaving care by end reason. The most common single reason for leaving care remains return home (37%) , but this category has also seen the largest proportion decrease over two years. The largest increases have been in adoption and Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) made to former foster carers, the latter of which increased from 1% in 2007/8 to 3% in 2011/12. There continue to be surprisingly high levels of the use of the category 'ceased for any other reason' (E8).

13% more children left care via any permanence route in 2011/12 than in 2010/11, comprising a 12% increase in adoption; 20% increase in SGOs and 8% increase in Residence Orders (RO).

The Phase 3 sample of 2,936 children ceasing to be looked after in 2011/12 through either Adoption, SGO or RO and the most recent national DfE data, show that the split between adoptions and other permanence routes (SGO and RO combined) is now virtually 50:50 (50% Adoption; 30% SGO and 20% RO). There is some regional variation in the pattern, with London Boroughs, East of England, North East and West Midlands showing marginally higher prevalence of SGOs and ROs to Adoption. Of the children achieving permanence through SGOs, in 17.9% of cases the Order was made to former foster carers.

Black and minority ethnic (BME) children appeared in the sample to generally to be under-represented in the permanency process, with white children over-represented. Although numbers for minority ethnic groups achieving permanence overall are small, almost two thirds of BME children achieved permanence through SGO and RO with just over one third being adopted.

In general children who leave care through SGO and RO spend less time in care than those who are adopted. However a significant proportion of SGOs were also granted to former foster carers where children had spent longer periods in care. The overwhelming majority of children leaving care through any permanence route are aged 1 to 4, with 5 to 9s being the second largest category. The totals for SGO and RO outnumber adoptions in all age groups other than the 1 to 4s, and for older children - 10 and over - there are over seven times as many SGO and RO as adoptions.

Of the characteristics of individual children which might influence their journey towards permanence, gender was found to be the least influential. Whilst numbers of disabled children in care are low, it is clear that they spend proportionately longer in care before a permanence order is granted than their non-disabled counterparts. Membership of a sibling group exerted the greatest (negative) influence over the intervals between key stages of the adoption process. The data clearly demonstrates the relationships between key intervals in the adoption process and overall length of time in care, and associated 'tipping points' beyond which more children are likely to spend longer in care. 95% of children matched within 12 months of entering care, left care in under two years, whilst 72% of those matched beyond 12 months remained in care for two years or more. Children who were adopted and who experienced an interval of six months or less between entry into care and the agency decision, were most likely to leave care in under two years. For children where the decision was made beyond a six month interval, the balance tipped, and a greater proportion would be in care for two years or more than for less than two years.

For many children, especially older children, sibling groups and BME children, permanency through routes other than adoption such as SGOs and ROs appear to be more timely and provide a permanent placement with previous carers, thereby enhancing placement stability.

## **Resources**

Despite significant reductions nationally in funding for local authority children's services, local authorities have protected (and in some cases increased) spending on children's social care in order to meet increased demand. How local authorities have managed to do this varies and it is difficult to demonstrate from the finance data returned, how local authorities are funding their statutory duties in the face of rising demand. S251 returns are notoriously

inconsistent and this data supplied by local authorities can't be reconciled with what they are telling us about the funding pressures they are experiencing in children's social care.

Budget reductions appeared to have been made in early help and/or other targeted services or through procurement efficiencies, management or organisational redesign in order to protect spending on statutory children's social care services. Local authorities report that reductions were "carefully planned and managed to reduce impact" without resulting in a cut in front line workers.

Over three quarters of local authorities had changed the way they commission services, with improved commissioning and cost savings reported by many of them, through either regional/sub-regional frameworks; increasing in house foster care to reduce the reliance on more expensive agency foster care placements and better commissioning of specialist and independent assessments.

Four times as many local authorities have reduced the use of agency staff than those whose usage has increased, and 20 authorities stated that there has been an increase in posts to cope with additional safeguarding pressures. A significant proportion of respondents report an increase in the recruitment of newly qualified social workers and there is difficulty in some areas in recruiting experienced and qualified social work staff.

### **Reasons for Increases and Decreases in Safeguarding Activity**

Responses from local authorities suggest a myriad of presenting issues which have caused an increase, together with some explanations as to why, in some part reinforcing 'known' prevalent factors and in some cases offering new ones. Where authorities have experienced increases in safeguarding activity, including children becoming looked after, the single most quoted presenting issue is domestic abuse and associated concerns. Other parental issues reported are largely drug use, an increase in parental disability, isolated families and large sibling groups.

Child sexual exploitation and risky behaviours were also issues quoted frequently as a reason for increases in safeguarding activity in relation to older children. 28 authorities (51%) have experienced increases in risky behaviours, sexual exploitation or use of welfare secure accommodation, although it was noted by some that it may not be that behaviours have changed but that there is increased recognition and awareness, especially around child sexual exploitation, as local authorities develop more robust processes for identification and action. Other risky behaviours such as missing children, drug use, gang related activity, an increase in youth violent crime within the home, increase in self harm, and increase in young people with mental health issues or challenging/complex behaviour were also cited.

A combination of other factors was reported including:

- Effects of recession as some families continue to experience financial constraints and stress;
- Raised awareness of abuse, especially neglect, amongst other professionals;
- The impact of early help, in terms of uncovering but also meeting unmet need earlier;
- Development of multi-agency safeguarding hubs; integrated teams and service redesign;
- Increases in the child population and the impact of increased migration.

45 local authorities reported a reduction in the number of children subjects of child protection plans at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 from the previous year, and 33 authorities reported a reduction in the number of children looked after for the same time period due to targeted work by the authority, including:

- A more dedicated children in need or early intervention service, resulting in a reduction in the number of children subjects of a child protection plan and children looked after; new screening, assessment or multi-agency 'front door' services, such as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH);
- A decrease in neglect due to a strong targeted support sector;
- A decrease in referrals, mainly domestic abuse, as a result of social work presence in the local police station; or better screening by the Police before a referral is made;
- An overall reduction in child protection plans achieved through using various strategies focussing on family resilience, e.g. the signs of safety approach, and use of the strengthening families conference model;
- Reduction in children subjects of child protection plans due to introduction of single proportionate assessment model;
- Referrals decreased due to focussed multi-agency training on thresholds and risk assessment, opened professional advice line, strengthened prevention (step down) service.

### **The Impact of Early Help on Safeguarding Activity**

35% of responding authorities believe that early help has started to affect safeguarding activity, for some this is as an increase in safeguarding activity as a result of uncovering unmet need; and for some it is to decrease safeguarding activity through earlier support. 19 (21%) local authorities felt early help has not yet affected safeguarding- it was 'early days' and too soon to see an impact (positive or negative). There was an overwhelming view that



early help does play a crucial part in affecting safeguarding activity, or will do so more in the future. As one would expect, the reasons for increases in safeguarding activity mirror the reasons for decreases in safeguarding activity. This highlights not only the complexity of this work but also that the benefits of early help are preceded for a period of time by an increase in safeguarding activity.

### **Organisational Factors Affecting Safeguarding**

There is a substantial level of organisational change reported by local authorities. 16 respondents had undergone internal organisational change and restructure with mixed descriptions of the effect from an 'unsettling initial effect' to very positive. Types of reorganisation range from joint adults/children's/other directorates or other significant restructuring to reshape how social work is lead and delivered, including contracting out services and becoming a 'commissioning authority'. Shared services and integration were cited as a focus within reorganisation, with longer term advantages envisaged. 15 authorities said they were implementing different ways of locality working, e.g. development of children's hubs and children's practices (akin to GP practices) and for some, it was too early to say what the longer term effects of organisational changes will have on outcomes for children and young people.

Partner agencies, especially health and police, are also experiencing significant reforms and budgetary pressures, but there remains a strong commitment at individual level to working together to safeguard children. 20 local authorities reported uncertainty, confusion and concern in relation to health reforms.

In other children's services, cuts and changes to youth services, targeted services such as educational support and educational psychology, schools (including emergence of more academies) were reported to impact (either positively or negatively) on safeguarding activity. Some local authorities are be using the 'savings' made from cuts to the above mentioned services to fund children's social care sufficiently to meet increased demands.

### **The Impact of Policy and Other Key Changes**

There were very mixed responses as to the impact of national and local policy changes on safeguarding activity; whilst it is difficult to predict the overall effect of the considerable number of changes, what is clear is that the national and local policy contexts are extremely complex in terms of inter-dependencies and potential for unintended consequences.

The two changes most frequently cited by respondents were the Family Justice Review and the new Adoption regulations and targets. The former was largely welcomed by authorities as having a positive impact, the latter was expected to have a significant impact on capacity, but will improve outcomes.

### **Direction of Travel**

57 (67%) authorities believe that the trajectory for quantity of safeguarding activity and the numbers of looked after children will continue to increase due to a continued rise in complexity of cases, remand changes, continued increases in population and inward migration, and the continuation of the recession, exacerbated by welfare reforms. Those authorities predicting a reduction in referrals, children subjects of child protection plans or looked after children, cited a greater focus on permanency planning and moving looked after children on more quickly, recruitment of adopters and improved early help as key drivers.

### **3. Challenges and Considerations**

This research has analysed 'how many' children and in some part their characteristics, using universally used variables such as primary need codes, end reasons, age band and so on, to try and identify reasons for any change in numbers. Views and experiences from local authorities together with analysis of the data have provided evidence of a continued, though not universal, rise in safeguarding activity nationally and also internationally. Some authorities are beginning to see a decrease in numbers of referrals, children subjects of child protection plans and children looked after, whilst others face a steeper increase, which does not appear to be linked to any one reason but rather a composite of many factors which are social, economic and demographic,, and which appear to be getting more acute and more prevalent.

Many respondents cite the challenge of budgeting that balances continuing to fund social care services in response to increased demand and implementing effective early intervention services. Overwhelmingly local authorities recognise that once effective early intervention services are implemented, they will start to see a reduction in safeguarding activity, specifically referrals, children subjects of child protection plans and looked after. In the meantime, the costs of providing for the increased safeguarding activity in response to demand will continue for the foreseeable future. It is imperative that local authorities continue their twin-track approach of early intervention to choke off demand, and at the same time continuing to fund children's social care.

In terms of predictions of factors affecting safeguarding activity made in Phase 2, these are clearly borne out by the evidence presented here from Phase 3. In Phase 2, we stated that *“Many of the reasons for the increase in the volume of safeguarding activity over the past two years will continue: the effects of the Southwark Judgement; increased public and professional awareness and improved multi-agency training; and better awareness of complex cases where parental factors are affecting the children such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health”*. However, given the inter-dependencies of the impacts of local and national policy changes, and the establishment of early help services to reduce the numbers of children subjects of child protection plans and looked after children, it is difficult to give definitive forecasts. The impact of the changes to remand, specifically the conferment of looked after status to young people on custodial remand, are difficult to quantify (national estimates vary from 300 – 2,000 newly qualifying young people).

#### **4. Areas That May Merit Further Enquiry**

- a. What are the outcomes for children when a child protection plan ceases and whether there is evidence that length of child protection plans makes a difference, analysing the length and number of plans, together with how many children subject of a child protection plan go on to become looked after. Although data was not available for this research, DfE collects this information in the 903 return. Our hypothesis is that longer (lifelong) child protection plans facilitate a child remaining with its family and that the ‘threat’ of separation is diminished and therefore families are more likely to cooperate to address their risk behaviour and/or poor parenting and ultimately this will reduce the numbers of children taken into care.
- b. The use of ‘multiple’ as a category of abuse for child protection plans has risen, from 8.8% of all plans to 10.2% and whilst 48% of authorities use this category, the usage by a small number has increased significantly. A potential hypothesis for the increase in use of multiple categories is that cases are increasingly complex with no single prevalent category of abuse.
- c. How we develop a robust overview of children looked after throughout the year to identify the significant ‘in-year churn’ and identify the cohorts of looked after children by types of plan and length of time looked after rather than a snapshot of those looked after on 31<sup>st</sup> March or who start or cease during the year.
- d. The apparent reduction in responding authorities in the number of children accommodated under a series of short term breaks set against the reported, though small, increase in numbers of children looked after for reason of child’s disability.

- e. Deeper analysis of the stories behind the different permanency routes for children and young people. Is there a wider increase in the number of children where the decision to adopt has been reversed, and investigate in more detail the reasons why, especially those where prospective adopters are not found.
- f. How much of the changes in safeguarding activity over five years (especially initial contacts and referrals) are due to changed policy decisions, societal issues, improved safeguarding or data capture. This is especially pertinent to reasons for referral (including 'other than CIN' and 'unknown'); use of placement code 'any other placement (Z1)' and reason for ceasing to be looked after 'care ceased for any other reason (E8)'.
- g. Although absolute numbers are low, in what circumstances would local authorities use 'low income' as a reason for children becoming looked after.
- h. 16 and 17 year olds represent 21% of looked after children at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 with a rise in those becoming looked after and a slight increase to 1.9% of those becoming subjects of child protection plans. How can we better understanding the current and foreseeable context for this group of children in light of the continued effect of the Southwark Judgement; the economic climate and welfare reforms; risky behaviour and raising school age.

## **5. ADCS Narrative and Emerging Hypotheses**

- a. What this research clearly shows is that levels of demand in safeguarding activity continue to rise and the overwhelming majority of directors of children's services think demand will continue to rise further over the coming years. Local authorities are managing to contain the pressures but further budget cuts and continued rise in demand will see sequential escalation of costs and pressures. The rise in demand however masks significant variations across local authorities. Safeguarding is a complex business, as this research shows; as local authorities work with local partners in other agencies and in the voluntary and charity sectors, to hold risk lower down the statutory services spectrum, the vulnerability of funding in other agencies will also contribute to the continued increases in safeguarding activity.
- b. Variations in the challenges and the responses to those challenges are significant amongst local authorities. The relaxation of national timescales for assessments and other prescriptive guidance will increase this diversity in responses. Given the disparity in changes to the population in different areas, it is right that local authorities have this freedom to respond. How well the 2013 multi-inspectorate inspection of multi-agency arrangements for child protection framework will respond to and adequately reflect

those varying challenges and how it will measure the effectiveness of agencies' responses to those challenges remains to be seen.

- c. For those authorities who have started to see a reduction in referrals through either multi-agency safeguarding hubs, advice lines or other 'front door' changes, is this evidence of the Munro access to social work advice recommendation in action?
- d. For many children, including older children, sibling groups and BME children, permanency through routes other than adoption such as SGOs and ROs are more timely and provide a permanent placement with previous carers.
- e. Increased rates of permanency are clearly demonstrated, with adoption making up half of the total numbers. Adoption is the most common form of permanence for a very particular cohort – lone, white, young children; this cohort of LAC is a small proportion of the overall LAC population. Whilst we welcome and support the government's current focus on adoption, it is clear that reforming and promoting adoption will do little to improve the outcomes of the majority of children and young people in care. This does not mean we should stop shining the light on adoption processes but it does beg the question as to how we can better address the needs of the majority.
- f. The principal reason for the reversal of agency decision to adopt is a lack of adopters. The current reforms to assessing and approving adopters will in time increase the pool of available adopters. We would therefore expect that the number of reversals of agency decisions to adopt for this reason will decline over the next few years. There is some evidence that decisions are changed as a result of a desire not to separate sibling groups. The clear implication here for the marketing campaign to encourage more people to come forward to become adopters is that it needs to be targeted towards people willing and capable of adopting sibling groups. Local authorities are and will continue to find different approaches to permanence for sibling groups.
- g. The importance of the timeliness of decisions from entry into care to decision to adopt, and the time taken to Placement Order and the time taken to matching is clear. These messages support the introduction of timeliness measures in adoption scorecards and the reforms to concurrent assessment and approval of foster carers as adopters.
- h. Workforce: it is pleasing to see reduced reliance on agency social workers and increased numbers of NQSWs. The challenge for local authorities however is in attracting and retaining experienced qualified social workers. Such experienced professionals are in high demand and some authorities (particularly neighbouring LAs) are in effect competing with each other to attract experienced social workers. This is likely to cause inflationary pressures amongst neighbouring authorities. Some local authorities are

working together to agree strategies between themselves for controlling inflationary pressures on wages and enhancement packages paid to experienced social workers.

- i. The increases and decreases in safeguarding activity highlight the variation in the challenges that local authorities face and the responses to those challenges are equally diverse. Some local authorities are seeing progress in reducing volumes of certain types of safeguarding activity as a result of better early intervention. Some of the other key features that seem to be reducing the volume of safeguarding activity are: use of CAF; multi-agency MASH-type arrangements; and, understanding trends in order to target services. But in some local authorities the positive effects of early help are yet to be evidenced. Long term stability of funding for early help will be essential if we are to see a wider spread reduction in volumes of safeguarding activity.
- j. On the whole, local authorities have protected (and in some cases increased) spending on children's social care. How local authorities have managed to do this given the national funding context varies. Some will have used the unring-fenced early intervention funding to protect spending on statutory children's social care services. Undoubtedly a variety of creative strategies will have been employed locally, all of which can ultimately be described as 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'.