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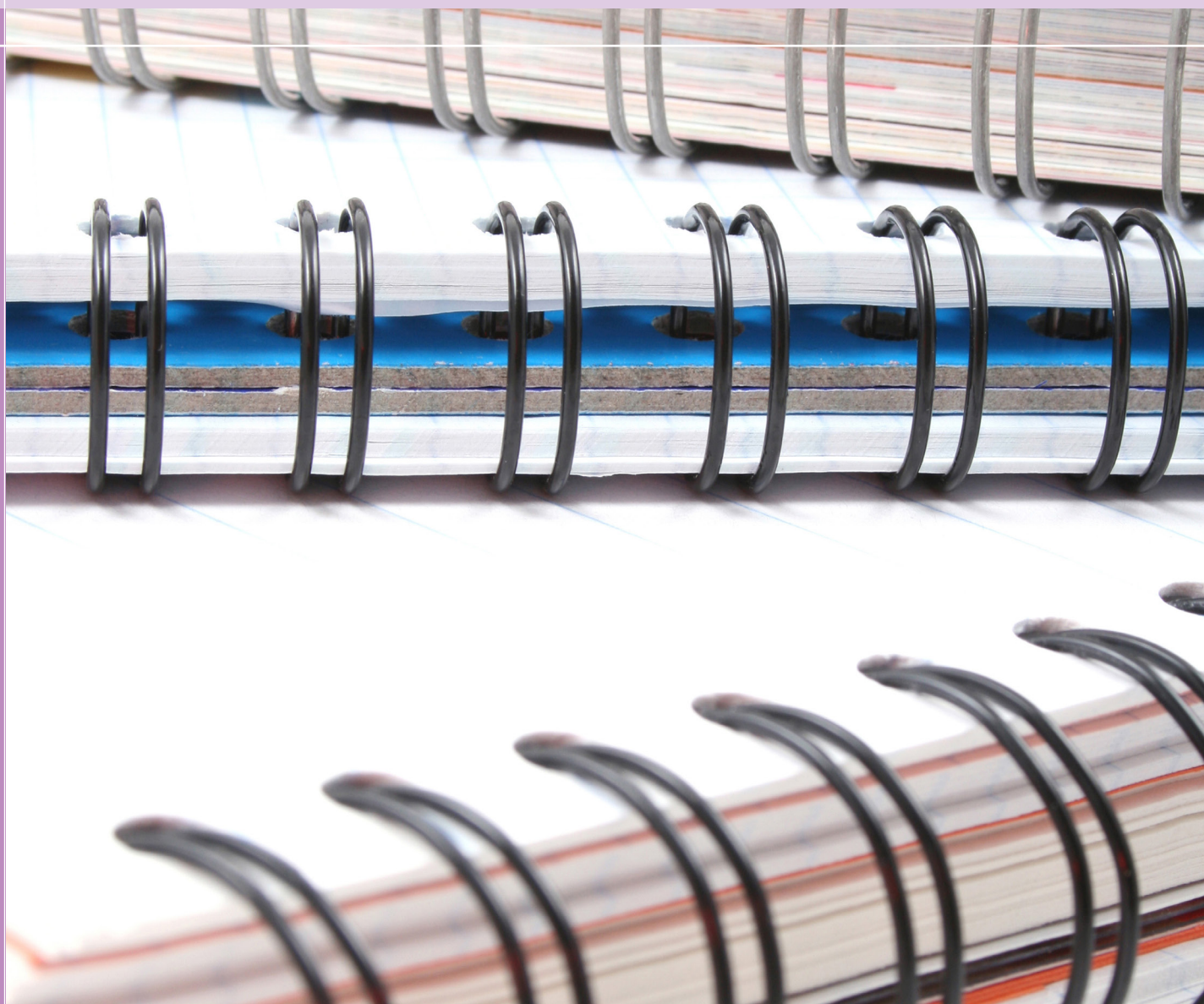
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Longer-Term Impact of Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

This study, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on behalf of the Local Government Association (LGA), explores the impact of the safeguarding children peer review programme. The initiative was established in 2010, with the aim of supporting and challenging councils in reflecting on current provision of safe services in respect of safeguarding children and young people. The safeguarding children peer review consists of a multi-disciplinary team from different councils visiting for a period of five days to review safeguarding practice in the authority.

The evaluation team tracked the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews in six councils over a one-year period. They conducted interviews with strategic and frontline council officers, lead members and partners on three occasions:

- prior to their safeguarding children peer review to explore aims and anticipated outcomes

- three months after their safeguarding children peer review to explore emerging impacts

- one year after their safeguarding children peer review to track longer-term impacts and explore legacy.

What impacts arise from safeguarding children peer reviews?

- Safeguarding children peer reviews impact in three ways: by providing an insight into councils' strengths and areas of weakness; on actions to develop services or working practices; and in changes or improvements to safeguarding practice.

- Safeguarding children peer reviews can result in a range of 'quick wins' for councils where recommended actions are easy to implement. Impacts on safeguarding services and practice are more likely to be realised in the longer term.

- There was a notable shift from 'actions' to 'impact' from the interim (3-6 month post-review stage) to the 12 month post-review stage. Eight key areas of impact were identified. Impacts relating to listening to the voice of the child emerged more strongly for councils one year after their review. The area with the least evidence of impact was vision, strategy and leadership.

- Councils were cautious about attributing impacts solely to the safeguarding children peer review. Other key influences include feedback from Ofsted inspections, changes in leadership, and the national and local context.

What influences the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews?

- Some of the factors that influence the impact of the safeguarding children peer reviews relate to their methodology; others relate to local context and the councils' responses.

- Key factors for achieving impact include: the range of staff and key partners involved; the composition of the review team; flexibility of the review methodology; the review's focus and depth; staff engagement; the detail of review findings and recommendations; ongoing monitoring; and local context and timing.

What are the benefits of safeguarding children peer reviews relative to other forms of scrutiny?

- Councils viewed safeguarding children peer reviews and inspections as complementary.

- Strengths of safeguarding children peer reviews relative to other forms of scrutiny include: the ability to tailor the focus of a review to meet the specific needs of councils; its constructive and collaborative approach; opportunities to share learning and practice with peers; and obtaining recommendations on how improvements can be made.

- Limitations of safeguarding children peer reviews relative to other forms of scrutiny include: a perception among some staff and partners that safeguarding children peer reviews are less important, and the lack of consequences if councils do not respond to their findings.

Key messages and points for consideration

- Overall, councils value safeguarding children peer reviews and highlight both short- and long-term benefits of involvement. However, this mechanism does not act alone in bringing about change. Rather, it is one tool from a suite of possibilities, in a council's journey to improvement.

- One year on, interviewees felt that they had made changes to improve safeguarding that would not have happened without the safeguarding children peer review.

- To ensure safeguarding children peer reviews have the most benefit, longer-term engagement with the review's recommendations and related actions is required. Legacy will also be helped through succession plans and monitoring.

- Much of the evidence of impact in the short and longer term is based on the perceptions of individuals. Councils participating in safeguarding children peer reviews should consider how to ensure the delivery and evidencing of impacts in the longer term, particularly at the service user level. The LGA may also wish to explore further ways to build some follow-up contact into the standard review procedure.

1   Introduction and background

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) to explore the longer-term impact of the safeguarding children peer review programme from 2012 to 2013. The programme was established in 2010, with the aim of supporting and challenging councils in reflecting on current provision of safe services in respect of safeguarding children and young people. The safeguarding children peer review consists of a multi-disciplinary team from different councils visiting for a period of five days to review safeguarding practice in the authority.

This study builds on the findings of two previous research projects conducted by the NFER on behalf of the LGA, focusing on the safeguarding children peer review process and how this could be refined in councils which had received adequate, good or outstanding ratings of their safeguarding and looked-after children services (Jeffes and Martin, 2013) and subsequently for those councils with a Notice to Improve (Easton et al., 2012).

Findings from these previous studies demonstrate that the safeguarding children peer review approach was sufficiently flexible to result in a range of benefits for councils regardless of their intervention status. However, while most of the councils in both studies were very positive about the safeguarding children peer review, they found it difficult to isolate the impact of the programme. In both cases, the research took place within a fairly short time period following the safeguarding children peer review and this prohibited investigation into the longer-term impact and legacy of the process.

1.1   Aims of the research

This research seeks to explore the longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews for councils. In particular, the study explores:

- the aims and rationales of councils prior to their safeguarding children peer review, their expectations of the process and anticipated outcomes

- initial reflections on the safeguarding children peer review process and perceptions of early impact following the review

- what has changed locally in the longer term as a result of undergoing a safeguarding children peer review and how it has helped to achieve the overall desired outcomes around improvement

- lessons and learning which can be shared with the sector and provide recommendations for the LGA in relation to the safeguarding children peer review programme as a whole.

1.2   Methodology

This study investigates the involvement of six councils in the safeguarding children peer review programme, and tracks impact over approximately one year following their review. All of the councils volunteered to participate in the research, following initial contact with the LGA. The research was conducted in four distinct phases, as set out in Figure 1.1.

Appendix 1 provides details of the characteristics of the six councils involved in the research and some examples of their self-selected key lines of enquiry for their safeguarding children peer review.

Figure 1.1 Overview of research activities

Phase 1
- **Desk research** of relevant documentation for the six councils, to contextualise the research in relation to issues, challenges and areas of success for each council.
- **September – December 2012**

Phase 2
- **Telephone interviews** with key council officers, lead members and partners *prior* to their safeguarding children peer review to explore their aims and anticipated outcomes.
- **September – December 2012**

Phase 3
- **Face-to-face interviews** with key council officers, lead members and partners *three months after* their safeguarding children peer review to explore emerging impacts.
- **January – March 2013**

Phase 4
- **Telephone interviews** with key council officers, lead members and partners *one year after* their safeguarding children peer review to track longer-term impacts and explore legacy.
- **September – December 2013**

1.3   About the participants

This research comprised a series of interviews with a range of strategic and operational staff members in each participating council, as well as their partners involved in safeguarding. Appendix 2 provides further details of the interviewees involved in the three phases of this longitudinal study.

1.4   About the report

This report presents an overview of the early and longer-term impacts arising from safeguarding children peer reviews in six participating councils. It includes the following sections:

Section 2: perspectives on the impacts arising from safeguarding children peer reviews

Section 3: factors which influence the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews

Section 4: how safeguarding children peer reviews compare to other forms of scrutiny

Section 5: key messages and points for consideration.

The primary audience for this report is the LGA. It may also be of interest to government, as well as local councils.

2 What impacts arise from safeguarding children peer reviews?

Key findings

Safeguarding children peer reviews have an impact in three ways: on councils' insight into their strengths and areas of weakness; on actions to develop services or working practices; and in changes or improvements to safeguarding practice.

Safeguarding children peer reviews can result in a range of 'quick wins' for councils where recommended actions are easy to implement. Impacts on safeguarding services and practice are more likely to be realised in the longer term.

There was a notable shift from 'actions' to 'impact' from the interim (3-6 month post-review stage) to the 12 month post-review stage. Impacts relating to listening to the voice of the child emerged more strongly for councils one year after their peer review. The area with the least evidence of impact was vision, strategy and leadership.

Councils were cautious about attributing impacts solely to the peer review. Other factors that influence impacts include: feedback from Ofsted inspections, changes in leadership, and the national and local context.

This section presents councils' (and their partners') perspectives on the impacts of participating in a safeguarding children peer review. The findings are based on evidence collected from councils at an interim stage (3-6 months following their review) and

12 months following their review. It provides insights into councils' journeys to impact, examples of shorter- and longer-term impacts, and highlights the difficulty of identifying and attributing impacts solely to the safeguarding children peer review.

2.1 The journey to impact

The safeguarding children peer review impacts in three ways:

- on councils' insight into their strengths and areas of weakness

- on councils' actions to develop services or working practices

- in changes or improvements in the outcomes of councils' safeguarding practice.

Figure 2.1 shows that early impacts of the safeguarding children peer review occur at **insight** level, followed by **action** as a result of their discussion and reflection. At the 3-6 month stage of the research, councils unanimously reported that the peer review had been beneficial in bringing about insights into their safeguarding practice and that practical actions had been carried out in response to this, or were being planned. **Outcomes** largely emerged in the longer term. One year after their safeguarding children peer reviews, more tangible impacts were recognised, and it was apparent that actions taken in some council areas had led to impact.

Figure 2.1 Impact journey

Insights (e.g. idenification and development of ideas to address areas for improvement)	Actions (e.g. steps taken to address critical reflections and integration of priority areas into action planning documents)	Outcomes (e.g. measurable progress against specific service improvement objectives)
1–3 months	3–9 months	6–12 months

2.2 Summary of impacts

The impacts identified by council staff and partners are structured around the standard themes of the safeguarding children peer review explored in all councils:

- effective safeguarding practice and service delivery

- capacity and management of resources

- working together

- voice of the child

- performance management

- vision, strategy and leadership.

As suggested by the impact journey set out in Figure 2.1, more impacts (as opposed to actions) were reported one year post-review. Interestingly, impacts relating to the voice of the child emerged more strongly one year post-review than they had previously. Perhaps as might be expected, impacts around vision, strategy and leadership were also more likely to be recognised in the longer term. Across all of the impact areas, there was a notable shift from 'actions' to 'impact' from the 3-6 month to the one year post-review stages.

Figure 2.2 provides an overview of the main areas of impact. Further detail on each of these areas is provided in sections 2.3 to 2.8.

2.3 Impacts on effective safeguarding practice and service delivery

Between 3-6 months after the review, the six councils had most often taken steps towards translating their insights into tangible actions to improve service delivery. In part, this was because they had already identified a need to improve in many of the areas highlighted

Figure 2.2 Overview of impacts

Safeguarding practice and service delivery	• Service improvement; audits and quality assurance; improvement tools and plans; training; improved awareness of thresholds.
Capacity and management of resources	• More consistency and stability in the social care workforce; changes to resource management; reduced cost of services; improved procedures for monitoring referrals.
Working together	• Streamlined structures and subgroups; memoradums of understanding between partnerships; more partnership working; less duplication and more efficient use of resources.
Voice of the child	• Raised awareness of the voice of the child; better sharing and recording of the voice of the child; integration into everyday activity.
Performance management	• Improvements to the creation, analysis and reporting of performance data; improved ability to act on intelligence; impacts on personnel-related performance management.
Vision, strategy and leadership	• Single action plans for improving safeguarding; streamlined structures and subgroups; improved responsiveness and speed of change.

by the safeguarding children peer review, or that they had started to make improvements prior to the review taking place. The peer review teams' areas for consideration and recommendations were not always perceived as offering a completely new perspective, but rather a means of affirming and corroborating councils' priorities for development. Safeguarding children peer reviews also built momentum and established support for increasing the pace of change within their safeguarding practice.

At 3-6 months post-review, the actions taken were often considered 'quick fixes', and were therefore introduced within a relatively short time frame. As a result of the safeguarding children peer review, councils had assessed and adjusted existing activities. This included, for example, developments relating to:

- **improvements to the early help offer** (e.g. improved understanding of early help and the reporting of early help activities to the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and Health and Wellbeing Board to increase the priority of early help in community development);

- **audits and quality assurance** (e.g. multi-agency case audits, and reviews of performance information and management oversight arrangements);

- **improvement tools and plans** (e.g. development of audit tools to better understand safeguarding practice, implementation of SMART[1] plans to encourage staff to become more outcomes focused; and reviews of business plan documentation);

- **training** (e.g. training delivered to social workers and partners relating to referral thresholds, outcomes-based planning and supervision for practitioners and managers).

At the one year post-review stage more tangible impacts were cited across the six participating councils. These included:

- **improved systems and services** (e.g. less time spent in care, improved waiting systems for casework and referrals, and further improvements to early help and prevention services);

- **improved quality assurance** procedures;

- **better awareness of thresholds and referrals**, and **improvements to the Team Around the Child (TAC) and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)** (as a result of training put in place at the 3-6 month review).

2.4 Impacts on capacity and management of resources

At the 3-6 month post-review milestone, councils' response to recommendations around capacity and management of resources tended to be quite disparate (unlike other thematic areas). While some appeared to have given these recommendations a high priority and made a number of improvements, others were unable to evidence any changes at this stage of the process.

Examples of councils' actions 3-6 month post-review revolved around implementing and **improving procedures for recording the number and quality of referrals**. This included: better processes for recording of details of referring agencies; examining patterns of causes for referral and the proportion of referrals above thresholds; and analysing school census data to explore demographic changes, with a view to adapting services for the local area.

The impact of the peer review on staffing arrangements was also evident at this interim stage in some cases. For example, one council introduced measures to monitor social work staffing levels using a monthly vacancy report. Three to six months following their review, they reported that 90 per cent of posts were filled by permanent staff. In another council, managers issued guidance for allocating cases to newly qualified social workers and improvements were monitored by appropriate allocations shown in case allocation reports. To complement this, the council conducted a survey of newly qualified social workers and placed renewed emphasis on increasing the voice of their newly qualified social workers' support group.

In the final data collection phase, 12 months post-review, impacts around capacity and resources were more evident. Councils reported:

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1 SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound

- **more consistency and stability in their social care workforce** as a result of the earlier focus on retention and recruitment of staff;

- **changes to resource management** (e.g. one council channelled more resource into their front-door procedures, which led to improvements in their ability to handle referrals; another doubled the amount of time spent on the safeguarding board);

- **reduced service costs** (e.g. after considering value for money in their commissioning framework, one council reduced the amount they were spending on independent fostering agencies).

2.5   Impacts on working together

A number of activities and impacts were evident relating to working together to promote effective safeguarding 3-6 months post-review. However, councils felt that there was still room for improvement and anticipated that developments in this area would be more clearly evidenced over time. At this stage, councils had taken important early steps towards improving working relationships, increasing the level of communication and collaboration with partners. Examples included:

- **recognition of potential areas of weakness and discussions amongst partners** about new ways of working (e.g. modes of communication, strategies for promoting engagement);

- **workshops** for social care teams and their partners (e.g. to reaffirm the council's vision and develop a shared understanding of safeguarding priorities);

- **multi-agency case audits** (e.g. to ensure a shared understanding of referral thresholds and child protection procedures);

- **contractual changes** (e.g. to include specific safeguarding responsibilities during the re-commissioning of health services).

One year post-review, some impacts were experienced based on recommendations to improve working relationships and practices. Interviewees referred to:

- **streamlined structures/reduced numbers of subgroups** (e.g. reorganising the activities of

LSCBs to facilitate robust discussion on key issues, and reviewing the relationship between the LSCBs and other accountability bodies, such as the Children's Trust);

- **creation of a memorandum of understanding** with other boards and partnerships to make accountabilities clearer;

- **working with more agencies** (specifically health and the police);

- **improved partnerships at strategic levels** (e.g. more joint commissioning);

- **greater awareness of services offered by partners and other agencies,** and hence less duplication and more efficient use of resources.

2.6   Impacts concerning the voice of the child

Across the participating councils there were few reported impacts in relation to changes in capturing, recording and using the voice of the child 3-6 months post-review. Few councils had put in place specific strategies or actions to bring about improvements or change in this area. One council reported that their designated 'voice and influence team' was planning to lead training and development for staff and partners, but these plans were in their early stages. Feedback at this point suggested that measures to increase the voice of the child would be better evidenced in the longer term.

One year on from their safeguarding children peer review, impacts around the voice of the child emerged more strongly than any other type of impact. Participants (across all councils) believed that the peer review had led to councils:

- **more actively seeking out** the voice of the child (e.g. better representation of young people on school councils, looked-after children groups and groups of children in the community or Youth Parliament; increased spending on young people's rights and participation contracts);

- **recording** the voice of the child more appropriately (e.g. introducing a voice of the child framework, along with quantitative indicators to demonstrate the

extent of young people's participation; aggregating key messages from consultations and systematically recording young people's views);

- **raising awareness** of the voice of the child in their local area;

- **sharing** the voice of the child more widely;

- **integrating** it into everyday activity.

2.7 Impacts on performance management

In the first 3-6 months post-review, councils placed a strong emphasis on addressing recommendations relating to the development of performance management processes, believing that this was essential in ensuring impact in other areas. Their initial progress in this area centred on developing a fuller understanding of the performance management issues raised by their peer review team and devising strategies to respond to them. This included:

- **reviewing processes for collecting and sharing performance information** (e.g. through documentary analysis and meetings with business management colleagues to discuss how improvements might be made);

- **introducing audit procedures to monitor the quality of case file recording and staff involvement in cases** (e.g. regular 'deep dives' of council performance; audits of cases open for longer than one year to track any changes in allocation of social workers);

- **monitoring staff performance** (e.g. through formalised line management feedback and through the creation of performance 'dashboards' to monitor and feedback partner involvement in safeguarding);

- **regular reporting** of performance information to improvement and scrutiny bodies (for example, the LSCB, Health and Wellbeing Board and elected member meetings). This was central to all of these actions in the first 3-6 months following the peer review.

One year post-review, the focus on the implementation of performance management strategies was continuing. All councils reported impacts on their ability in this area. As one social care leader explained: 'We are absolutely data rich and more intelligent ... the peer review drove us to being a bit more dynamic around performance, rather than commenting on it'. Impacts on performance management included improvements in:

- **providing and analysing performance data as evidence**. Staff feel more able to generate performance-related data, to recognise gaps and risks, and have more confidence in it (e.g. councils developed their ability to provide 'exception reports' on areas for concern or praise; and improved benchmarking);

- **councils' ability to act on intelligence and performance data** to bring about service improvement. Improvements in generating and analysing performance data is helping councils to plan more effectively, and to respond appropriately to what their data is telling them.

Councils also referred to positive developments regarding performance management. These included:

- **improved practice** as a result of successful staff development;

- **greater staff morale** (e.g. identifying low morale had led to thoughtful ways of addressing its causes, and an associated boost in staff satisfaction).

Interviewees also noted that being involved in a peer review had provided them with an opportunity for professional development (for example, by building networks, raising awareness of other services and increasing their confidence in inspection and monitoring processes). This is an unintended consequence of the safeguarding children peer review which should perhaps be recognised and promoted.

2.8 Impacts on vision, strategy and leadership

At 3-6 months post-review there was consensus among the six participating councils that the peer review teams' recommendations relating to vision, strategy and leadership had a broader, longer-term focus (as opposed to offering 'quick fix' solutions). Since then, several had experienced a significant change in leadership, with key staff changes within children's social care. However, although it remains an area where fewer specific actions and impacts are identified, one year post-review, some participating councils were able to identify impacts around vision, strategy and leadership. These included:

- **streamlined structures and subgroups** (as set out in section 2.5 – these will inevitably also impact on the leadership and strategy in a council);

- **single action plans for improving safeguarding** (e.g. integrating review findings into the service improvement plan led to a clearer strategy and focus for service development; single action plans also allow a shared vision to be more easily communicated and shared with partners);

- **improved responsiveness and speed of change** (e.g. the safeguarding children peer review had led one council to recognise that it was risk averse and took too long to implement change. As a result, they had begun to tackle this at all levels to ensure they can be more responsive and efficient in the future).

2.9 The difficulty of identifying and attributing impacts

The impacts identified in this study need to be considered in context. The longitudinal element of this research and the differences between the participating authorities make it difficult to identify and track impacts. Other initiatives were taking place at the same time as the safeguarding children peer review, making it difficult to attribute change and improvement in safeguarding practice solely or directly to the review. These variables should be taken into consideration when reviewing the range and extent of the impacts presented in this section.

Table A1 (in Appendix 1) shows that the six councils were at different stages of their improvement journeys at the outset of this research, and that their **key lines of enquiry varied** considerably according to their individual circumstances and priorities. While there was some similarity in the peer review recommendations across the participating councils, there was inevitable variation. As a result, some councils will have experienced impacts in certain areas, and not others, and to a greater or lesser extent than another council.

This research also aimed to include a range of council staff and partner perspectives. As participants were self-selecting, **this led to greater involvement of strategic staff**, particularly at the 12 month post-review data collection phase. As strategic staff are not involved in the delivery of safeguarding services, these interviewees were often unable to give examples of how a specific action had led to an impact for end users, for example.

Attrition of interviewees over the research period (see Appendix 2) also made it difficult to define impact. In many cases, the staff involved in safeguarding children peer reviews had left or moved into something different. This 'churn' of staff not only makes it difficult to track impact, but it might also hinder impacts from actually occurring. Succession plans and monitoring the outcomes of the peer review are important in mitigating against this.

Whilst improvements in safeguarding services were recognised by councils, we need to exercise some caution in attributing these changes to the peer review alone. Nearly all of the councils involved in this study experienced an inspection of safeguarding services by Ofsted since their peer review, and several had a change in senior leadership. Other councils pointed to other LGA peer reviews (e.g. the corporate peer review) as also working with the safeguarding children peer review to bring about impact. One practitioner explained how the peer review formed part of a series of investigations:

> It's about the peer review being a cog in the overall process, we had the peer review, then we had the Ofsted, and then an Ofsted of a different part of children's services, and they've all fed into each other in terms of strategic management … it is a bit difficult for me to

imagine what it would have been like just to have the peer review and then no Ofsted … it makes it difficult to say that what we are doing is because of the peer review.

In most cases, interviewees felt that the safeguarding children peer review did not act alone in bringing about change. Rather, they considered it as one tool, from a suite of possibilities, in their journey to improvement.

At the 12 month follow-up, some councils referred to financial constraints as also leading to service change (e.g. reduced funding streams forced councils to reconsider service design and look to provide more streamlined, cost-effective, and 'joined-up' services). On reflection, some interviewees felt that the move to co-located services had led to improvements in their safeguarding practice.

3 What influences the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews?

Key findings

- As well as the actions that councils take following their safeguarding children peer review, there are factors or processes at play in the review itself, which can either facilitate or act as a barrier to impact in the short and longer term. Some of the factors and processes relate to the methodology of a peer review; others relate to local context and the councils' response to the review.

- Key factors for achieving impact include: involving a range of staff and key partners; the composition of the review team; flexibility of the review methodology; the review's focus and depth; engagement of staff; the detail of review findings and recommendations; ongoing monitoring; and local context and timing.

The six councils were all ambitious in their expectations of impact prior to their safeguarding children peer review. They anticipated that the review would provide an impetus to drive forward improvements in service delivery and subsequent outcomes for children and young people. In this section, we focus on the factors and processes that sustain or increase the likelihood of impact of safeguarding children peer reviews, along with factors that reduce the potential for impact.

3.1 The relationship between processes, actions and impact

Section 2 identified a number of actions taken by councils that led to impact. As well as actions, a number of factors or processes involved in a safeguarding children peer review can affect the extent to which impacts are realised. Sometimes they act as barriers, at other times, they facilitate change, improvement and impact.
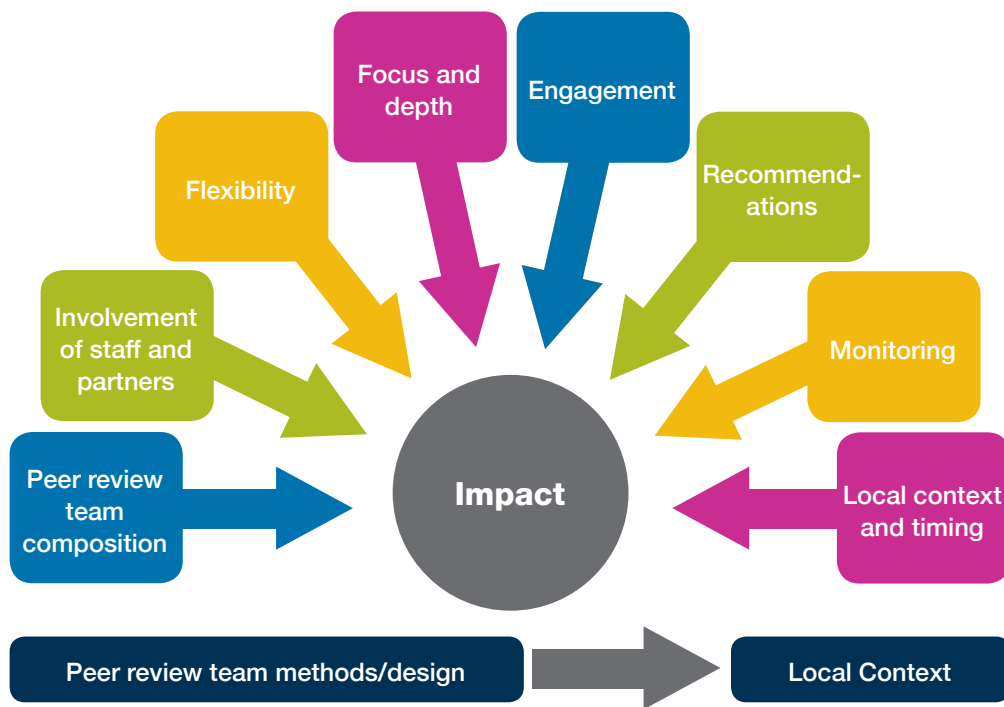
Processes involved in the safeguarding children peer review include, for example, the composition of the review team, the focus and timing of the peer review and the engagement of council staff and partners. The actions following the review are the actual changes that councils make, including improvements to systems and services (as set out in section 2). If the right processes are in place, these can have a direct influence over the impacts, and also influence the actions that councils take.

Figure 3.1 shows how both 'processes' of the review and resulting 'actions' ultimately lead to impact.

Figure 3.1 Influences leading to impact

Figure 3.2 What factors influence the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews?

3.2 What factors or processes influence the impact of the safeguarding children peer review?

Figure 3.2 sets out the eight key factors that interviewees identified as influencing the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews. The majority of the factors are related to the design and methodology of the review. However, there are aspects of the local context that also influence the extent to which the safeguarding children peer review can bring about long-term tangible impacts and outcomes.

3.3 How to ensure that the safeguarding children peer review leads to long-term impacts

At each stage of the research, interviewees identified influences on the extent to which the safeguarding children peer review had led to impacts. They also suggested possible improvements to help bring about impacts in the longer term. Table 3.1 identifies some key recommendations to maximise the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews. These include areas for the LGA to consider (such as possible revisions to the peer review methodology), as well as issues for councils to note (regarding better engagement with the process).

Table 3.1 Ensuring long-term impacts from safeguarding children peer reviews

Factor	How can councils enhance the impact?	How can the LGA enhance the impact?
Peer review team composition	• Invest time in identifying and agreeing the range of appropriate skills and attributes required of review team members. For some councils, it is important to involve peers with experience of working in similar circumstances. Peers from councils with contrasting profiles can provide valuable challenge for others.	• Continue to recruit peers with diverse skills and experiences to the safeguarding children peer review programme.
Involvement of staff and partners	• Raise awareness of the purpose and potential value of the safeguarding children peer review among staff and key partners. • Invite a cross-section of staff and key partners to participate so that a range of views are captured. • Ensure all levels of staff are able to participate and make meaningful contributions, including strategic and frontline personnel.	• Build sufficient time into the safeguarding children peer review process to enable peers to gather feedback from a range of staff and partners.
Flexibility	• Embrace the flexibility offered by the review methodology and develop key lines of enquiry which best suit the specific needs of the council.	• Avoid formulaic approaches to the delivery of safeguarding children peer reviews. • Support councils in determining appropriate key lines of enquiry.
Focus and depth	• At the outset, specify and manage expectations around the depth and detail required of the review. • Where appropriate, consider focusing on one area in more depth as an alternative to broader brush approaches. • Liaise regularly with the review team to ensure the safeguarding children peer review follows the key lines of enquiry.	• Ensure peers build up an accurate and informed understanding of the local context by triangulating feedback and avoiding small numbers of individuals dominating review findings. • Revise the review methodology to offer increased levels of scrutiny where it is required. This might include the addition of practice observations and more extensive case file audits. • Consider how the review methodology could more closely align to the new Ofsted inspection framework.

Table 3.1 Ensuring long-term impacts from safeguarding children peer reviews cont'd

Factor	How can councils enhance the impact?	How can the LGA enhance the impact?
Engagement	• Commit to an open and transparent peer review. Communicate this vision to all staff and partners so that they can give open and honest feedback to peers without feeling there will be negative consequences for themselves or the council. • Encourage buy-in through multi-agency feedback sessions. • Emphasise to staff and partners that responding to review findings and recommendations is as vital to improvement and impact. • Recognise and promote the professional development opportunities that engaging in safeguarding children peer reviews can provide.	• Provide councils with information to share with staff and partners that describes the safeguarding children peer review process and demonstrates how it has led to impacts in other (similar) councils. • Ensure safeguarding children peer reviews are well organised and effectively delivered. • Build in appropriate levels of quality assurance to foster confidence among staff. • Avoid onerous amounts of preparation for councils. This can discourage some staff and lead others to have unfulfilled expectations.
Recommendations	• Be open to the recommendations provided by the review team. • Set aside time, post-review, to develop an action plan for improvement.	• Provide guidance and training to peers to support them in making appropriate evidence-based recommendations, with suggested improvements and solutions. • Encourage peers to highlight strengths as well as weaknesses in feedback. This can boost staff morale and facilitate continued improvement.
Monitoring	• Implement formal processes for monitoring post-review outcomes. This can help to ensure the delivery and evidencing of impacts in the longer term. • Allocate key actions to a strategic group or individual, with specific targets for assessing and evidencing progress.	• Build monitoring visits/contacts by peers (at three-, six- and 12-month intervals) into the review programme. • Establish stronger links with the peer challenge programme to increase accountability.

Table 3.1 Ensuring long-term impacts from safeguarding children peer reviews cont'd

Factor	How can councils enhance the impact?	How can the LGA enhance the impact?
Local context and timing	• Timetable reviews at appropriate points in the inspection cycle to avoid safeguarding children peer review recommendations being quickly superseded by those of Ofsted. • Consider safeguarding children peer review succession plans where there are changes in key personnel. This will maintain responsibility for implementing review recommendations and monitoring outcomes.	• Continue to establish links with Ofsted to coordinate the scheduling of safeguarding children peer reviews. • Recognise that the safeguarding children peer review can have limited impact in an authority experiencing difficulties. Such councils may direct resources and focus to areas other than those highlighted by the safeguarding children peer review.

4 How does the safeguarding children peer review compare to other forms of scrutiny?

Key findings

Councils viewed safeguarding children peer reviews and inspections as complementary and congruent and identified methodological similarities. Strengths and limitations of the safeguarding children peer review include:

Strengths

- Aids inspection planning and preparation
- Is tailored to the needs of councils
- Provides opportunities to share knowledge and practice
- Is conducted by those with relevant experience of the sector
- Offers a constructive and colllaborative approach
- Provides recommendations
- Is without penalties

Limitations

- Not sufficiently solutions focused
- Perceived as less significant (i.e. no grade of outcome is awarded)
- No obligation to commit to the process
- No accountability or requirement to implement recommendations

This section of the report focuses on the perceived value of safeguarding children peer reviews relative to other forms of improvement and scrutiny. A range of strengths and weakness of the safeguarding children peer review programme were identified by interviewees. Sometimes aspects were identified as strengths, at other times they could also be perceived as limitations.

Councils identify similarities between safeguarding children peer reviews and Ofsted inspections, particularly in their methodology, and view the two processes as complementary. Safeguarding children peer reviews are considered a helpful precursor to inspections. The preparation can be beneficial for collating relevant information and enabling less experienced staff to familiarise themselves with the scrutiny process. Safeguarding children peer reviews can also be an effective follow-up activity. They support councils to assess distance travelled and identify ongoing areas for improvement within shorter time intervals than the standard inspection cycle.

It is helpful that the focus of a safeguarding children peer review can be tailored to specific key lines of enquiry determined by the council. In contrast, there is a greater amount of uncertainty about the focus of inspections, which can mean they are more difficult to plan for and incur a greater amount of preparation. While the focus of a safeguarding children peer review can be narrower than an inspection, it is considered less in depth than other forms of scrutiny, such as consultancy or independent evaluation.

In general, councils value the more relaxed and open manner of a safeguarding children peer reviews compared to formal inspections and regulatory visits. The supportive environment that the peer review operates in enhances the potential impacts that it can generate. Staff report a greater amount of collaboration and dialogue with the peer review team, allowing them to follow up areas of weakness identified during the on-site visit and to provide further evidence to contextualise findings and alleviate any potential misunderstandings. Safeguarding children peer reviews can also provide greater opportunities for council staff and their partners to share learning and practice, as they are able to network with the review team. In some cases, they continue to have dialogue after the review.

The opportunity to select a peer review team with current or very recent experience of working in the sector helps with perceived reliability and credibility of the review and its findings. The format of the

safeguarding children peer review, which involves providing feedback and recommendations on how improvements can be made, provides a value-added dimension compared to other forms of inspection and scrutiny. In contrast to consultancy or other forms of evaluation, however, the recommendations of safeguarding children peer reviews are not always considered to be as detailed.

Safeguarding children reviews are viewed as advantageous as they do not grade a council's performance or incur any penalties where issues are identified. As a result, councils are more likely to commit to an open and transparent appraisal of their safeguarding services and staff feel less anxious about feeding back on areas for development. However, this can also be a limitation, as some staff and partners perceive a safeguarding children peer review as having less significance and importance than inspections, which means that they are less likely to engage in, or commit to, the process. As set out in Table 3.1, this influences whether the findings and recommendations of the safeguarding children peer review are taken forward. As one corporate leader pointed out:

> *Ofsted remains more powerful in changing your behaviour and your direction of travel than a safeguarding children peer review does … the peer review doesn't give you that threat, which is why I like it a bit more. Ofsted feedback is not more valuable but it just carries more weight.*

Councils also value the potential to validate and showcase effective practice through safeguarding children peer reviews. This includes using review findings to demonstrate improvement internally to lead members and corporate strategic leaders, as well as highlight progress externally to the DfE and Ofsted. Some interviewees observed that safeguarding children peer reviews can provide a boost to the morale of staff who may have experienced significant organisational change and intense scrutiny following previous council underperformance. In these cases, the safeguarding children peer review provides an opportunity for individuals to reflect on progress and gain feedback and recognition for their efforts in improving safeguarding practice. This constructive approach also helps to ensure the review is a positive activity for all involved. As one social care leader highlighted:

> *It is the best form* [of scrutiny] *in terms of learning. Much better than an inspection. It gives a better understanding of challenges. Ofsted inspectors inspect, they don't help you get to grip with the challenges and issues. It's a much better and stronger approach.*

Some councils would like to see safeguarding children peer reviews more closely aligned to formal inspections, believing that this would better support their preparation for Ofsted and increase the meaningful engagement of staff and partners in the review process itself and in taking forward the recommendations. Others value how the safeguarding children peer review programme is distinct from other forms of scrutiny as it is more tailored, constructive and collaborative and can provide a unique form of professional development.

5 Key messages and points for consideration

Overall, the six participating councils valued their safeguarding children peer review and highlighted both short-and long-term benefits of involvement. However, a peer review does not act alone in bringing about change. Rather, it is one tool from a suite of possibilities, in a council's journey to improvement.

The actions and outcomes following a safeguarding children peer review include a diverse array of small-scale 'quick win' solutions, alongside the realisation of higher-level strategic goals and priorities that require longer timescales to be operational and embedded. By the end of the study, 12 months post-review, participating councils cited tangible impacts and improvements in practice and service delivery. These were particularly evident in relation to performance management, the voice of the child and working together. Councils rarely identified direct impacts for children and young people, and many impacts of safeguarding children peer reviews are not evident for some time. Longer-term engagement with review recommendations and related actions is therefore required to ensure maximum benefit. Given the churn of staff within councils, succession plans (which appear rare) are essential to legacy.

One year on, the majority of interviewees felt that they had done something to improve safeguarding specifically as a result of the safeguarding children review that they would not have otherwise. However, in all cases, interviewees struggled to isolate the specific impact of the programme. Prior to their safeguarding children peer review, few councils had fully considered how impacts would be evidenced. This made it difficult for some individuals to articulate where the review had (or had not) made a difference. Councils' approaches to evidencing impact focused primarily on demonstrating that actions had been taken in response to the safeguarding children peer review recommendations, rather than specific impact planning and monitoring. As such, much of the evidence of impact in the short and longer term was based on individual perceptions rather than, for example, through the use of performance data.

The findings from this longitudinal study of impact would suggest that the safeguarding peer review programme should continue as councils find them helpful in driving improvement. There are some areas for development, which could enhance the process. Councils participating in safeguarding children peer reviews need to consider how to ensure the delivery and evidencing of impacts in the longer term, particularly at the service user level. The LGA may also wish to explore further ways to build some follow-up contact into the standard review procedure.

Appendix 1 Overview of participating councils

This appendix provides a brief overview of the six councils participating in this research. It also sets out some examples of their self-selected key lines of enquiry for their safeguarding children peer review, adding further detail to the following standard themes explored in all councils:

- effective safeguarding practice and service delivery

- capacity and management of resources

- working together

- voice of the child

- performance management

- vision, strategy and leadership.

Table A.1 overleaf shows that the six councils' key lines of enquiry varied widely according to their individual circumstances and priorities. Equally, the level of detail provided within the key lines of enquiry differed between councils: in some cases, the councils specified highly detailed areas of consideration for the review team, whereas others were content to provide broader parameters for the review.

Further details of the context and priorities for each council are presented in the first interim report (see Jeffes and Martin, 2013), published as part of this longitudinal study.

Table A.1: Overview of the six participating councils

Council	Location	Type	Performance in SLAC[2] inspection[3]	Examples of specific key lines of enquiry
1	Yorkshire and the Humber	Metropolitan	Inadequate	Early intervention strategy and newly established multi-agency safeguarding team Partnership arrangements, particularly with schools Performance management and quality assurance systems Role of Local Safeguarding Children Board and scrutiny arrangements in providing challenge
2	South East	County	Inadequate	Quality and timeliness of initial and core assessments Processes for recording, disseminating and monitoring performance and responses to performance issues Evidence of positive outcomes for children in care, including the quality of decision making Evidence of improvements in Child and Adult Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provision and referral pathways Quality of health and wellbeing commissioning alongside provision of in-house services
3	South East	Unitary	Adequate	Evidence of the quality of casework, care planning and supervision Evidence of the impact of early help processes and systems
4	North West	Unitary	Adequate	Embedding of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) across all agencies, and consistency of referral thresholds and feedback mechanisms Priority given to the views of children and families in informing case planning, and the inclusivity of consultation methods for younger and disabled children Stability of care placements and the clarity of outcomes in care plans Quality of relationships with adults' social services and engagement of adult services with safeguarding initiatives
5	West Midlands	Metropolitan	Adequate	Performance management arrangements and quality assurance frameworks promoting consistent good and improving outcomes Routes to increasing the voice of children, young people and families within the local safeguarding system, including to inform needs assessments, strategies and commissioning plans Management of the impact of changes to the police and health sector in respect of partnership working, commissioning arrangements and frontline practice Effectiveness of agencies in supporting staff to exercise greater professional judgement to improve outcomes
6	North West	Metropolitan	Adequate	Effectiveness of prevention and safeguarding arrangements in view of increases in number of children subject to child protection plans Role of user voice in safeguarding practice Performance management and quality assurance systems Effectiveness of CAF and early help arrangements

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2 Safeguarding Looked-After Children

3 This relates to councils' SLAC inspection grading prior to their safeguarding children peer review in 2012.

Appendix 2 Number of participants involved in the research

Table A.2 Number of participants involved in the research

| Role	Pre-review interviews	3 months post-review interviews	12 months post-review interviews
Social care leaders (e.g. Directors of Children's Services, Heads of Service)	11	11	5
Corporate leaders (e.g. Programme Managers, Business Managers)	3	4	1
Partners (e.g. Health, Local Children's Safeguarding Board Chairs)	9	8	3
Council members	2	3	2
Practitioners	2	4	3
Total	**27**	**30**	**14**

References

Jeffes, J. and Martin, K. (2013). *The Longer-term Impact of Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER [online]. Available: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGPR01 [30 January, 2014].

Easton, C., Martin, K. and Walker, F. (2012). *The Impact of Safeguarding Children Peer Reviews* (LGA Research Report). Slough: NFER [online]. Available: http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGIS01 [30 January, 2014].

References

Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge
at: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/
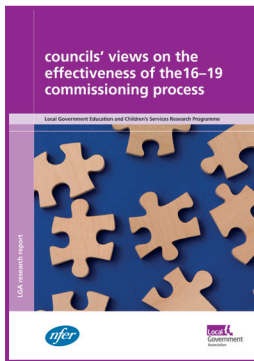
Councils' views on the effectiveness of the 16-19 commissioning process

The findings from this research suggest that councils believe that the current approach for commissioning 16-19 education and training provision could be improved by being more responsive to local need, more flexible and providing appropriate opportunities for vulnerable groups. This report provides a summary of survey results and individual case studies of five councils.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGEE01
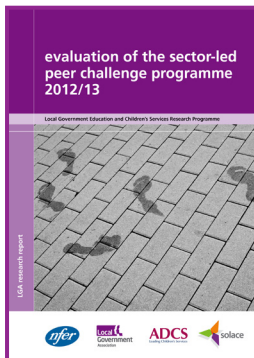
Evaluation of the sector-led peer challenge programme 2012/13

NFER's study explores regional lead stakeholders' views on the impact of the sector-led improvement programme. It involved 43 interviews across the nine regions. Stakeholders are overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of the programme in bringing improvements to services, despite the challenges involved.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SLPC01

The longer-term impact of safeguarding children peer reviews

This report sets out the expectations and anticipated outcomes of six local authorities participating in an LGA safeguarding children peer review. This report forms part of a longitudinal study comprising interviews with local authority officers and their partners to explore the longer-term impacts of the review over one year.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGPR01

For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk, web: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications.

The LGA commissioned NFER to conduct an evaluation tracking the impact of safeguarding children peer reviews in six councils over a one-year period. The research team conducted interviews with strategic and frontline council officers, lead members and partners at three discrete time points: prior to; three months after; and one year after their safeguarding children peer review. The three time points allowed exploration around participant's aims and anticipated outcomes; emerging impacts; and longer term impacts and legacy.

The report presents an overview of the early and longer-term impacts arising from safeguarding children peer reviews and explores perspectives on impacts; factors influencing impact; and how reviews compare to other forms of scrutiny.

LGA research report