



National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Children's services

Resourceful leadership: how directors of children's services improve outcomes for children experiencing child poverty

Summary report

Resource

This targeted report has been published alongside a longer report, **Resourceful leadership: how directors of children’s services improve outcomes for children.**

Resourceful leadership puts the concept of resourcefulness at the heart of good leadership of children’s services.

As illustrated in figure 1, resourcefulness¹ is the ability to:

- assess and widen your resource base
- select and apply the best mix of resources to address the type of challenge faced

The concept of a resourceful leader is helpful in thinking about the ways directors of children’s services (DCSs) are able to:

- assess their situation now and into the future
- actively seek to inform and shape the context they operate in to promote the interests of children and young people
- select a range of responses, drawing on both themselves and others as resources
- apply a response and see it through

Resourceful leadership defines eight core behaviours of resourcefulness. For the child poverty theme, the study was able to identify the following resourceful behaviours:

- the ability to collaborate within the local authority and with partners by embedding structures and practices to facilitate collaboration, then using these practices to improve data and develop innovative, user-focused initiatives to enable a broader focus on the child’s context and family
- focusing on results and outcomes by creating strategies to improve outcomes in the long term, and taking measures to ensure data quality and performance
- the ability to be open to possibilities by proactively engaging in the task to find efficiencies by viewing funding challenges as an opportunity to undergo system reform and deliver more effective and efficient services while maintaining the focus on outcomes

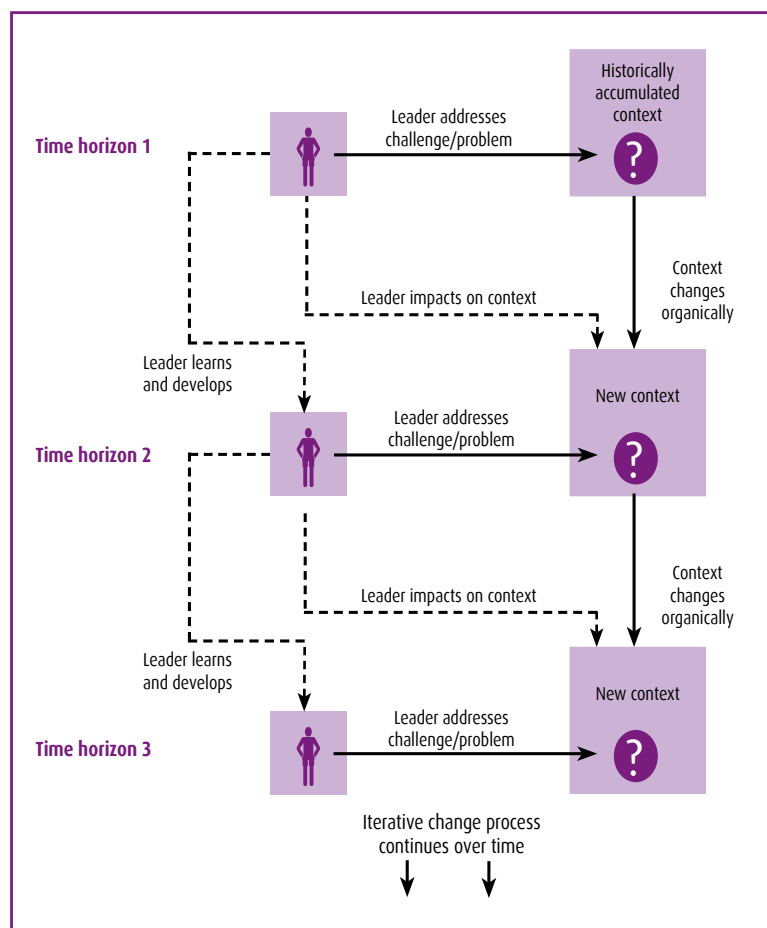


Figure 1 The dynamic relationship between leader and context over time

1. These are: openness to possibilities; the ability to collaborate; demonstration of belief in their team and people; personal resilience and tenacity; the ability to create and sustain commitment across a system; displaying a focus on results and outcomes; the ability to simplify; and the ability to learn continuously.

Evidence of effective practice

C4EO has produced a directors' summary which includes examples of effective practice in child poverty. The report is based on international research and validated local practice and can be found at:

- http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/poverty/files/child_poverty_directors_summary_1.pdf

This report seeks to build on the current evidence base by:

- identifying the leadership characteristics in DCS's and their senior leadership teams which impact on child poverty outcomes
- strengthening the body of knowledge on leadership and its impact on child poverty outcomes
- using this knowledge base to offer practical support to professionals in services for children

Leading collaboratively to reduce child poverty

Child poverty cuts across every stage of childhood and youth. Organisational divides around user groups often mean that responsibility for reducing child poverty is difficult to assign and data is inconsistent. Leaders participating in this research felt that greater collaboration within the local authority and with partners to enable a broader focus on the child's context and family was a priority to improve child poverty outcomes. Three actions were taken to promote this approach:

- embedding structures and practices to facilitate collaboration
- improving data through collaboration
- developing innovative, user-focused initiatives

1. Embedding structures and practices to facilitate collaboration

A number of leaders in the sample had implemented structures and practices which enabled practitioners to work more closely with colleagues in other areas or organisations.

In one authority, leaders were addressing child

poverty issues through a locality based approach which sought to create sustainable communities. The approach considered the family as a whole rather than just the parent, carer or child. Leaders were able to create an inter-professional ethos at a local level both within children's services and across partners. Clear lines of communication and a better definition of responsibility enabled more effective work on outcomes (see example 1).

Example 1: Embedding structures and practices to facilitate collaboration

Leaders suggested that measures to alleviate child poverty required significant planning and stakeholder involvement. Evidence of this can be seen in the recent introduction in one authority of 'Resource Panels'. These are local area groups that bring together a range of professionals to look at safeguarding and child poverty issues. The typical composition of a resource panel includes representatives from children's services and regulated services, as well as Family Assessment Support Team managers and the family group conference leader. Each resource panel meets monthly and the substantive content is around a case review usually brought by the principal social worker.

This idea was proposed by one leader who adjusted a system used in another authority in which they had previously worked. It has helped to improve collaboration when addressing child poverty problems and working on outcomes.

2. Improving data through collaborative working

Collaboration was seen by leaders as fundamental to improving data collection and analysis standards in child poverty. Building positive, productive relationships with leaders and practitioners within Children's and Adults services and across a wide range of partners was therefore viewed as a priority.

“Our ‘family support strategy’ was actually written by our lead educational psychologist. This just would not have happened before.”

(Assistant director safeguarding and social care)

Leaders in one authority noted the value of partnership with JobCentreplus, which helped in picking up softer data on targeting, such as information on the child’s development, challenges and family environment. This information, along with a strong relationship with children’s centres, helped leaders to build a well informed team around the child which was committed to improving outcomes.

3. Developing innovative, user-focused initiatives

Some leaders have taken a more innovative approach to collaboration. They have encouraged workers and users to take more responsibility for defining the services which should be provided. Through educating users on the issues which cause child poverty and how the authority can help, leaders can improve the quality of intervention and cost effectiveness of services as users will be better equipped to identify the support they require (example 2).

Example 2: A user-focused approach

Leaders in one local authority have brought Community health services closer to teachers and families to develop their skills and understanding of the issues causing child poverty. This approach was designed to encourage practitioners and users to take responsibility for areas in children’s wellbeing, to improve relationships between the practitioner and user, and deliver the service at a lower cost.

Focusing on results and outcomes in child poverty

To make the changes necessary to reduce child poverty in the long term, many leaders drew on a range of resources to inform their strategic vision. However, leaders recognised that a number of activities, such as improving data quality, were necessary in the short term to help achieve this long term objective. Two actions came across strongly which help to maintain a focus on results in the long and short term:

- identifying changes for the future
- improving results in the short term – implementing effective data systems

1. Identifying changes for the future

Leaders reported that inconsistency and unavailability of data within local authorities was a common problem. Consequently, many leaders drew on a range of resources both within and outside the authority to help identify longer term, innovative changes to reduce child poverty issues. These included:

- consulting with practitioners on the front line, which helped authorities to use existing knowledge to identify actions for improvement. For example, leaders in one authority encouraged frontline workers to present the Senior Leadership Team with ideas for system changes in the form of a business case. These initiatives were regarded as an effective method for improving supportiveness and buy-in from practitioners as well as identifying changes for the future
- recruiting specialist support. For example, an approach adopted by leaders in an authority with strong data was to recruit data analysts to make best use of the intelligence when developing longer term strategies to improve outcomes in child poverty
- using independent and government research which provides evaluative information from a wide sample of authorities on options for reducing child poverty. For example, one leader noted that excellent research from bodies such as IDeA knowledge resources, the Government Office and C4EO could be used to share best practice and inform strategies for future outcome improvement

2. Improving results in the short term – implementing effective data systems

As already noted, a number of challenges exist in the data for child poverty. These include:

- data on child poverty can be of limited use for local needs, as it was often conducted with the aim of being presented upwards to government at a national level
- some leaders suggested that even existing data, such as that for free school meals, was not necessarily a reliable indicator of child poverty

Consequently, a number of activities were carried out by leaders to make short term improvements to systems and practices which informed the quality

of child poverty data (see examples 3 and 4). Leaders were working to identify and implement improvements to the collection, input and analysis of data that could be made easily in the short term.

Example 3: Implementing effective data systems

In another local authority, “unwieldy” information systems were hindering the implementation of good practices and processes. “Streamlining of the data” provided better integrated information to improve child poverty knowledge across children’s services. This improved data has allowed leaders to introduce “a very strong performance management culture in the LA” (AD safeguarding & Social Care), based on Mark Friedman’s Outcome Based Accountability model, which helps to target work on outcome improvement.

Example 4: Implementing effective data systems

Leaders in a large county have increased the use of Local Integrated Teams (LITs) to address shortfalls in child poverty. The LITs focus on individual families and local demands. By considering a variety of local factors from parent needs to worklessness, leaders and practitioners have been able to take an inter-professional, targeted approach to improving child poverty data.

For example, leaders in one authority have implemented a ‘recording with care’ initiative to improve the quality of the data being put into the system. An important element of this programme was the comprehensive training of staff members. Leaders strived to implement improved auditing systems which would have an immediate impact in increasing user confidence and improving outcomes in child poverty.

The interactive data tool developed by C4EO may be helpful for leaders in this area: <http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/poverty/default.aspx?themeid=7&accesstypeid=1>

Openness to possibilities: reshaping child poverty initiatives in the face of funding challenges

With the challenge of in-year budget reductions and the continuing need to find savings over years to come, leaders were looking at ways to support activities to address child poverty challenges at lower cost. In child poverty, many leaders were remaining open to possibilities and viewed reductions as an opportunity to reshape service delivery.

Seeing reductions as an opportunity to reshape service delivery

Current and future funding reductions will lead to changes in which children’s services are delivered and through what means. Despite some reservations that service quality would suffer, many leaders viewed funding challenges as an opportunity to undergo system reform and deliver more effective and efficient services (example 5).

Example 5: Reshaping delivery through targeted initiatives

Leaders in one authority were using a ‘Think Family’ initiative which stretches across the partners of the Children’s Trust and, in particular includes the Probation Service, Health, Youth Service, Safer Communities Partnership, Young Offenders and Police. Leaders devolved some budget to a locality level to encourage responsibility for outcomes and to deliver services on a smaller, more targeted budget.

For example, a number of leaders were looking at creative ways to pool resources and funds to support child poverty related activities. Leaders employed this approach to ensure that resources were used most effectively to work on specific workstreams or outcomes, and to encourage organisations to work collaboratively. Shared responsibility for the budget and outcomes would help to drive improvement in the quality of services and ensure value for money.

Implications: questions for consideration

In light of these findings, we recommend that DCS's and their senior leadership teams review their individual effectiveness and their organisational outcomes by addressing these questions for action:

Leading collaboratively

- What are you doing to ensure good working practices to tackle child poverty are embedded through children's services and partners?
- Who are the key players and how can you influence and work with them?
- How do you ensure that collaborative practices are being used to help to improve data on child poverty? How confident are you that channels of communication are effective across your team? In children's services? With partners?

Focusing on results and outcomes

- How confident are you that you are drawing on all the available evidence to inform decisions in the short and long term?
- How confident are you that you are gathering evidence from all relevant stakeholders and sources?
- Do you have the right systems in place to ensure that data is good quality and can be used to measure performance? How can you improve these systems in future?
- Do you have a clear view of the priorities which are most important and cannot be compromised? What work are you doing now to ensure that these priorities are protected? How have you communicated these priorities across children's services and partners?
- Have you defined and agreed priorities for reducing child poverty with corporate, political and children's services colleagues for the next month? Six months? Year? Longer term?

Openness to possibilities

- Have you built strong working relationships and practices which enable you to consider a number of solutions to a given problem? How well do you work with colleagues and partners to find innovative solutions?
- Do you have the right resources in place to deliver effective work on outcomes now and in the future? What could be done to develop and improve these resources or use them differently?
- What have you done to ensure that responsibility for budgets and outcomes in child poverty is shared with colleagues in your team? Across children's services? With partners?

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