

Laming is a 'missed opportunity' say councils

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Lord Laming failed to consider how much his proposals to improve child protection would cost local authorities to put into practice, councils have told Children's Secretary Ed Balls in a strongly worded letter.

Organisations including the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) branded Laming's review as a "missed opportunity" to save children.

The letter is timed to influence Balls' full response to Laming, which is due by the end of the month. It said Laming's recommendations would be hard to implement unless the government considers "the economic realities of current public spending pressures". "The government is urged in the strongest possible terms to give much greater consideration to, and consultation around, how aspects of Lord Laming's report are taken forward," it said.

Leading council figures also said Laming failed to address the danger that children could fall through the net because referrals from other organisations such as schools are not good enough.

Lack of engagement from GPs is cited as a particular problem. The response said councils have "serious difficulties securing strategic commitment from the NHS".

It also argues that Laming - and by default Balls - have unreasonably raised the public's expectations that it is possible to save every child.

"Lord Laming's report could be seen wrongly as a panacea for the combination of failings and circumstances that led to such a sad and tragic loss," the letter said.

Laming's recommendation that all children who need support from children's services should receive an initial assessment from social services, is also problematic, they warned.

Speaking on behalf of the ADCS, Colin Green, director of children's services for Coventry, said this proposal was "unsustainable, unhelpful and unnecessary", adding that the government must clarify how different types of assessment fit together.

The sector-led joint response to Laming was written by the LGA in association with ADCS, London Councils, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Improvement and Development Agency.

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) said: "We will draw up a detailed response to Laming's report shortly."

What councils think about Laming's recommendations

A National Safeguarding Delivery Unit (NSDU) should be established to challenge and support children's trusts on safeguarding performance

Councils are concerned that the NSDU could duplicate existing improvement support work, run by organisations such as the Improvement and Development Agency for local government. They advocate a sector-led approach to improvement, so want the NSDU to promote self-assessment. The unit should also tackle joint working at national level. "It is disappointing that more is not said about the role the NSDU should play in ensuring there is improved consistency in the national framework for safeguarding," the letter said.

The DCSF must provide guidance to local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) on how to operate effectively

Councils want clarity on the relationship between directors of children's services, lead members, children's trusts and LSCBs. Changes to the statutory structure of LSCBs have limits, the letter said. A focus on culture and practice in LSCBs must be prioritised. Local authorities are sceptical as to whether lead members should be required to sit on LSCBs. The letter said: "The lead member should be informed about safeguarding arrangements."

The DCSF should make clear in guidance that the purpose of serious case reviews is to learn lessons

LSCBs and councils need "far greater clarity" about serious case reviews and their function, the letter said. The purpose of such reviews should be to improve practice, not to identify deficits and allocate blame, councils warned. Ofsted should play a role in supporting such learning.

Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HMI Constabulary and HMI Probation must ensure their staff have the skills to inspect safeguarding

Although councils maintain that external assessment is essential, the letter argued that the degree to which inspections can reflect what's happening in an area is limited. "Inspectors' understanding can only ever be partial, incomplete and imperfect," it said. Councils argue that inspection should include more qualitative judgments and constructive improvement support. They also believe that if the inspectorates had a "more robust" approach they would understand how disengagement from the health sector is damaging safeguarding.