

# Outstanding practice and the rhetoric of change: from an ethnographic study of leadership practice in child protection social work

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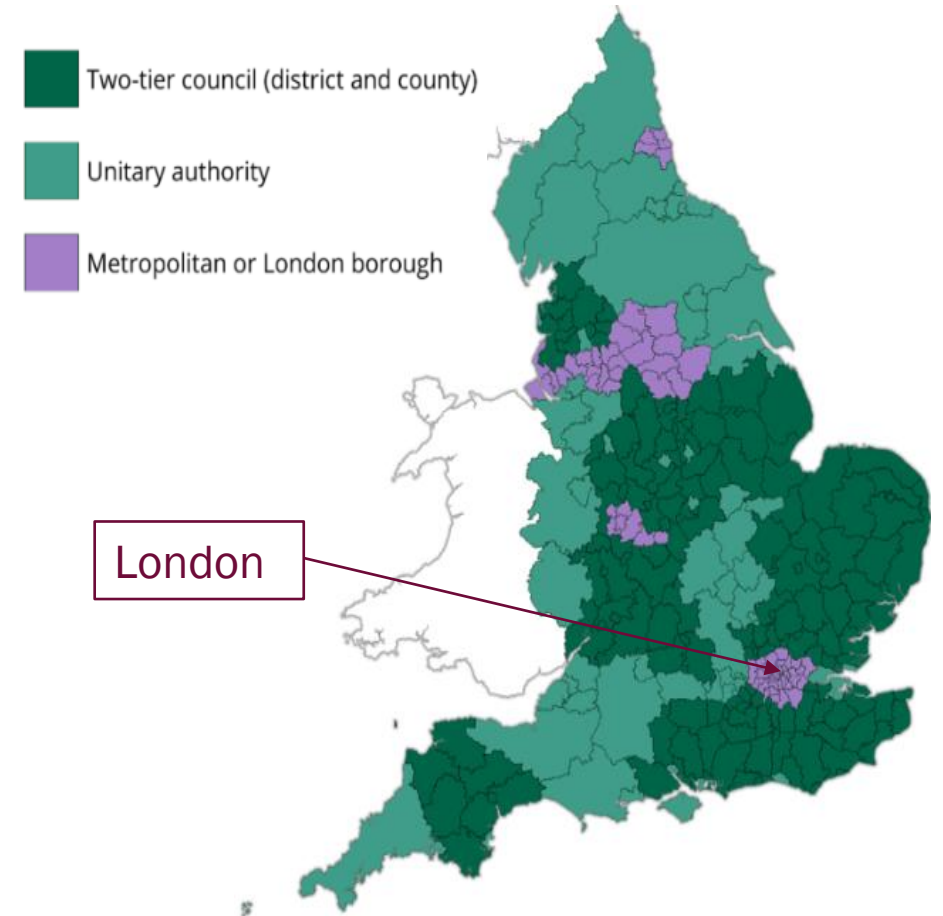
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# Presentation overview

1. Context: leadership of children's social care in England.
2. Three leadership approaches identified in the literature.
3. This study: ethnography of leadership practice in a London borough council.
4. Flavour of the findings.
5. Concluding reflections.



**The 152 local authorities in England**  
(February 2025, UK Government)

# Why leadership? It can support (or hamper) change

*“... in creating change in children’s services, culture eats training for breakfast ... the local authority in this study was very typical of local authorities in the UK: it was heavily driven by procedural understandings of what social work practice should be.”*

(Forrester et al., 2018)

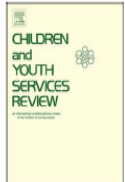
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A randomized controlled trial of training in Motivational Interviewing for child protection



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# Leadership in children's social care: important but elusive

- Government investment in leadership development since 2014.
- New inspection system in 2018 assesses *“the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families”* (Ofsted, 2017).
- Defining ‘leadership’ is problematic (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Spicker, 2012; Peters, 2018; Schaub et al., 2021).

*“The qualities that make a successful children's services leader aren't straightforward to define – but inspections show that they're very obvious when present – and strikingly so when they aren't.”*

(Eleanor Schooling, Ofsted, 2016)



**So what does  
leadership look like  
in practice?**

# Suggestion: three leadership approaches

## Custodial management (from 1970s)

Focus on preserving the profession (Friedson, 1986).

Social worker power.

Poor visibility of practice: practitioner discretion and gatekeeping of services.

## Managerialism (from late 1980s)

‘New Public Management’  
(Hood, 1991).

Management control: supervision, audit, inspection etc.

Standardisation and targets limit innovation.

## ‘Practice leadership’? (since 2014)

New policy direction.

Evaluation of Leadership Programme: “*authentic, open, visible, and collaborative*” leadership style (Capaldi Consulting Ltd, 2021).



# This study

- Ethnography of leaders and leadership in a child protection context.
- 7 months in a London borough.
- Shadowing leaders and observing them in professional meetings.
- Data from observations, ethnographic interviews, documents.

Seeking to capture everyday practice:  
how, where and when can leadership be  
seen, and to what effect?



## **A ‘flavour’ of the findings**

**Finding 1: senior management ‘engine room’**

**Finding 2: “outstanding practice” as a vision and rhetoric for change**

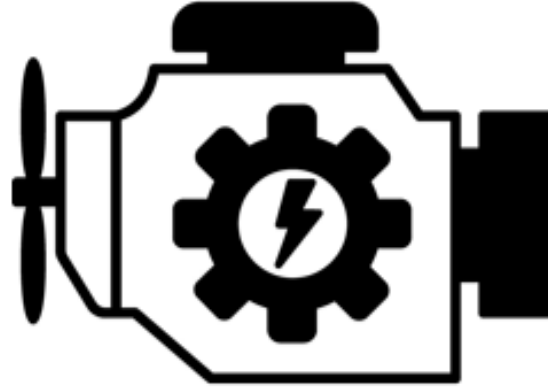
**Finding 3: purposeful organisational changes aligned to “outstanding practice”**



# The 'engine room'

“the most important or influential part of that organization or institution”

Collins Dictionary



- Both organisational and physical.
- Leadership team reinvigorated: (some) staff 'pruned', posts created, new staff handpicked.
- Glass-fronted, soundproof meeting room - highly visible.
- **Enabled LEADER-SHIP**: trusted group on board to collaboratively design and steer change.

# “Outstanding practice”: a vision and rhetoric for change

- New **practice framework** aligned to espoused **ideology** and **vision**.
- Articulated **values**: respect, relationships, honesty, reliability, anti-racist practice, belief in family as the best place for a child.
- Symbolised a **re-focus on social work practice** to improve outcomes for children.
- Conversations observed to be **child-first**, not **process-first** (with exceptions).



# “Outstanding practice”: a vision and rhetoric for change



Observation data example 1: Head of Service interrupts an ‘off-message’ speaker at a whole service training day:

*“We believe the best place for children is at home and so it’s about the support that is required to achieve that ...*

*... for me, permanency is more of a concept, how do we ensure that permanency is with their family ...*

*... any similar problem, come straight to me [then gave work location]”*

# “Outstanding practice”: a vision and rhetoric for change



Observation data example 2: Leader meeting with the Councillor (politician) responsible for children’s services:

*“My bit [children’s social care] is the biggest spend by some distance ... **need to pay attention** ... Also, the biggest risk for the Council ...*

*... should be looking at ... not just inspection outcomes, **outcomes for children** ....*

*... I’m worried about the impact of the corporate ask [cost-cutting]. **We risk destabilising some things that are really good and we have worked hard to get to [with the new “outstanding practice” framework].**”*

# Purposeful changes aligned to “outstanding practice”

Structure	Processes	Observed rhetoric/effect
More social workers to maintain low caseloads.	“Outstanding practice” framework – practice model.	“Outstanding practice” focus – high expectations, more support.
‘Peppercorning’ – specialists sprinkled across frontline teams.	Leaders and managers work alongside social workers.	Senior practitioners, managers, leaders more approachable.
Re-configured open plan office.	Re-designed quality assurance.	Increased practice visibility.

## Concluding reflections

- These are early findings, and this is a single local authority case.
- Leadership practice observed in this study seems different to the accounts previously reported: 'custodial management', managerialism.
- Suggests that the emergence of 'practice leadership' in Government policy (and investment in leadership development) is having an impact on leadership practice.
- How will this early example of 'practice leadership' fare against managerialism? Will the more established culture of managerialism eat 'practice leadership' for breakfast?
- Need more focus – in research and practice - on leadership.



# CASCADE

**Thank you!**



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