

The Improvement Service

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Chief Social Work Officer





What is the purpose of the briefing note series?

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes will be directly produced by IS staff but we will also make available material from as wide a range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services as possible.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. All briefing notes in the series can be accessed at www.improvementservice.org.uk/elected-member-guidance-and-briefings.html

About this briefing note

Elected members are a key group of influential individuals with whom chief social work officers want, and need, to work effectively together.

The purpose of this briefing note is:

1. To advise elected members of the role and functions of the chief social work officer.
2. To support partnership working between the chief social work officer and elected members.
3. To support the elected members to fulfil their duty under [Scottish Government guidance](#) to “satisfy themselves that the chief social work officer has appropriate access and influence at the most senior level and is supported to deliver the complex role described in this guidance”.
4. To support elected members to implement the recommendations and address the issues raised in the Audit Scotland report ‘[Social Work in Scotland](#)’ (2016).
5. To continue to promote an effective working relationship between elected members and chief social work officers.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Current delivery models for social work and social care services are not sustainable. The [Audit Scotland 2016](#) report states that “services are facing significant challenges, including financial pressures caused by a real time reduction in overall council spending, demographic changes and the cost of implementing new legislation and policies”. The report concludes that, if councils and integration authorities continue with the same methods of service delivery, additional spending of £510 – £667 million by 2020 will be required: a 16 – 21 % increase in funding.

Elected members are key decision-makers for social work and social care services on behalf of their constituents and will want to maintain a good understanding of, and effective scrutiny of, these services in order to ensure councils meet their statutory responsibilities, despite these pressures. Elected members must maintain oversight of social work and social care services regardless of local governance arrangements, for instance, through the frameworks of integration authorities or delegated services.

One of the most important ways of achieving this is through their working relationship with the council’s chief social work officer.

Local Authorities

Elected members have specific legal responsibilities to ensure that their councils are well governed, deliver Best Value and adopt sustainable policies and practices. This includes seeking assurance about the quality and effectiveness of the commissioning, planning, delivery and evaluation of social work and social care services, a role undertaken in partnership with, and with support and challenge from and to, the chief social work officer.

The chief social work officer is a role required in each local authority by Statute and cannot be delegated to integration authorities or other agencies. The chief social work officer is accountable to elected members through local governance frameworks and is a role for which the council retains statutory responsibility. The chief social work officer must be:

- a qualified social worker, registered with the Scottish Social Services Council
- designated as a ‘proper officer’ of the local authority
- of sufficient seniority and experience in both the operational and strategic management of social work services.

In practice, the role is usually held by a Director or Head of Service who often carries management responsibilities for a range of services, for example, adult social care, children’s services and/ or criminal justice services. The chief social work officer role is distinct from the post holder’s operational management responsibilities.

It is important, therefore, that elected members are clear about the role and function of the chief social work officer, as distinct from the post holder’s service management responsibilities.

Integration Authorities

Elected members may wish to refer to the relevant [briefing note](#) for further information on their responsibilities in relation to the integration of health and social care.

The Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014 provided for the delegation by the local authority of certain social work services to an integration authority. Each area has developed local arrangements in order to discharge this requirement. Irrespective of which services in the council or in the integration authority the chief social work officer may manage, the chief social work officer must be a non-voting member of the integration authority.

The role of chief social work officer is distinct from that of chief officer of the integration authority.

The chief social work officer undertakes the role across the full range of local authority social work functions, irrespective of the range of operational management responsibilities within their job description. For instance, the chief social work officer may be a Head of Children's Services where children's services are not delegated to the integration authority, or may be a Head of Adult Social Care where services for adults are delegated to the integration authority. In both scenarios, the chief social work officer role requires the chief social work officer to maintain a governance, quality and professional leadership role for all social work services, both in the integration authority and in the council.

The variation in arrangements across 32 local authorities has created a complex landscape for elected members and chief social work officers to navigate in seeking to ensure the oversight of social care and social work services.

The Chief Social Work Officer's perspective

The role of chief social work officer, as leader of the social care and social work profession, involves:

- The provision of professional advice in the discharge of the local authority's statutory functions as outlined in the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968
- The provision of strategic and professional leadership in the delivery of social work services
- The assistance to local authorities and their partners in understanding the complexities and cross-cutting nature of social work services and the key role social work plays in contributing to a wide range of local and national outcomes
- The support of overall performance management and the management of corporate risk

These functions apply in respect of both council and integration authority services.

Issues raised by the [Audit Scotland report](#): 'Social Work in Scotland' (2016)

The Audit Scotland report highlighted many challenges in relation to the delivery of social care and social work services and set out a number of issues in relation to the leadership and scrutiny role of elected members.

The report concluded that it is important that elected members:

- Assure themselves that service quality is maintained and that risks are managed effectively
- Initiate a wider conversation with the public about service priorities and managing people's expectations about social work and social care services in terms of future affordability
- Ensure that chief social work officers have the seniority and the capacity to enable them to fulfil their statutory responsibilities effectively
- Develop longer term financial strategies for social work services delivered by both councils and integration authorities
- Manage the risk inherent in the complexity of new governance arrangements and take responsibility for remaining informed, irrespective of whether or not they are members of the relevant council committee or integration authority
- Ensure they remain accessible to the chief social work officer
- Ensure they scrutinise reports by chief social work officers, demonstrating constructive challenge, questioning and support as required

Issues raised by the complex nature of the chief social work officer role

Elected members should note the complexities involved in the role of chief social work officer between ensuring professional advice-giving at 'arms-length' (as chief social work officer) and taking operational decisions (as within the substantive post). These two elements can be conflictual.

For example, operational decisions may be taken on the basis of budgets and performance expediency, and advice may be given on the basis of risk, ensuring quality and maintaining professional standards. Operational service structures may reflect financial constraints, however, may leave the service vulnerable in terms of management oversight or sufficient staffing resource, thereby failing to ensure staff are enabled to undertake their work to acceptable professional standards, possibly leaving service users vulnerable.

In other cases, operating procedures may inadvertently fail to take account of acceptable professional standards: procedures which encourage expedited hospital discharge without due regard for an individual's care beyond the point of discharge may leave already vulnerable individuals more so; or eligibility criteria which reflect budgetary constraints but which could potentially leave individuals in need without an appropriate level of service.

Understanding the complex nature of the role will support both integration authorities and councils to aspire to provide high quality services.

It is recognised that, although individual elected members and chief social work officers may change, excellent future working relationships will be built from a clear understanding of the requirements in relation to the respective duties of each.

What does this mean for elected members?

The following suggestions may strengthen the effectiveness of the working relationship between elected members and chief social work officers:

- Structured local and national dialogue should continue between elected members and chief social work officers, including discussion of the opportunities to address any gaps in understanding and opportunities to come together to further effective partnership working
- Joint training and development opportunities should continue to be implemented involving elected members and chief social work officers, both locally and nationally
- Councils and integration authorities are encouraged to develop clear, explicit and transparent written protocols on the ways in which the chief social work officer should discharge his/her function according to local governance arrangements

What does good practice look like in this area?

Good practice is demonstrated by the following:

- A shared understanding of the complexities and cross-cutting nature of social care and social work services and of what makes a difference to those using these services
- The chief social work officer and elected members mutually support and hold each other to account, for the benefit of those using services
- The chief social work officer annual report is used as a tool from which councils and integration authorities can learn in order to develop services which meet the needs of local people and communities both now and in future
- The chief social work officer, elected members and partner agencies demonstrate true partnership working by challenging and supporting each other to make effective decisions which are strengths-based, based on an assessment of risk, set in the context of human rights, delivered to the highest standards of quality and delivered with joint accountability
- There is a shared understanding of transparent processes evidenced by all members of councils' and integration authorities' governance arrangements
- Individuals demonstrate a commitment to the joint design, planning, commissioning, delivery and evaluation of social work and social care services which meet the needs of local people and which evolve over time to reflect changing circumstances

All of these would enable the local authority and the integration authority to give the highest degree of assurance of the efficacy of social care and social work services locally both now and in future.

Summary

Both chief social work officers and elected members have duties to oversee effective, professional and high quality social care and social work services delivered to the highest of professional standards.

Governance frameworks in local authorities and local integration arrangements require the participation of both the chief social work officer and elected members to provide accountability for these services. It is, therefore, vital that these individuals work together in partnership.

In summary:

- The chief social work officer is a role and function, rather than a specific job description. It is interpreted and enacted differently across each of the 32 local authorities
- The chief social work officer role extends beyond the operational management responsibilities held in parallel by the chief social work officer. The implications of this complexity and the opportunities and limitations it presents need to be understood by councils and integration authorities

- The chief social work officer role applies to the professional leadership of, and accountability for, all aspects of local social care and social work services – elected members must ensure they are familiar with the role and the spheres of influence of their local chief social work officer
- Improved understanding of the chief social work officer role is beneficial to elected members in discharging their responsibilities effectively in local authorities, in local integrated arrangements and to chief social work officers in being supported and challenged by elected members
- The Audit Scotland report (2016) will be of interest and assistance to elected members in scrutinising social care and social work services and in ensuring councils and integration authorities discharge their statutory responsibilities
- Partnership working between elected members and the chief social work officer is an essential component of the effective delivery of shared responsibilities

Further support and contacts

The chief social work officer in your local area can be contacted as per local protocols for elected members.

Social Work Scotland is the professional leadership body for the social work and social care profession in Scotland. Social Work Scotland influences and advises on the development of policy and legislation in relation to social work and social care and supports the development of the social work and social care professions.

Further contact with Social Work Scotland in relation to this briefing:

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