

DORSET TEST OF ASSURANCE CHECKLIST May 2025

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This document should be read alongside the Dorset Council Self-Evaluation of Services for Children in Need of Help and Protection and Children Looked After, March 2025.
- 1.2 In March 2025, Dorset's Children's Services was subject to an Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS), as part of the Department for Education's [Inspection Framework](#). A committee report to Cabinet, will be provided in June 2025. This report will provide updates on the findings of the [inspection](#) and assurance to council executives and elected members that improvement activities are aligned to the findings of the [report](#)
- 1.3 The document confirms the arrangements in place at Dorset Council to provide local assurance and as part of the Council and Children's Services commitment to continuous improvement.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services (last updated April 2013) [DFE stat guidance template \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) sets out how Local Authorities will, as a matter of course, want to ensure their structures and organisational arrangements enable them to:
 - Fulfil their statutory duties effectively (including ensuring that children, young people, and families receive effective help and benefit from high educational standards locally).
 - Be transparent about responsibilities and accountabilities,
 - Support effective interagency partnership working.
- 2.2 The guidance further sets out that local authorities should carry out effective assurance checks, integrated as part of their usual decision-making and scrutiny work, of their structures and organisational arrangements. Once any new arrangements are in place, local authorities should review their arrangements regularly to satisfy themselves that they continue to be effective.
- 2.3 These assurances should be agreed within the Council. They should be subject to self-assessment within the local authority, and to peer challenge and review, as part of the process of securing continuous sector-led improvement in the quality of services.
- 2.4 Children's Services are subject to regular inspections of services, where, as part of Ofsted's assessment of the quality and effectiveness of local authority leadership and management, inspectors identify an issue arising from the local authority's arrangements for discharging the DCS and LMCS functions, they may decide to look at the quality and effectiveness of the authority's assurance process.

2.5 The local authority may determine the precise nature of its own assurance process and how to provide transparency for local communities about which individuals are fulfilling the statutory roles of DCS and LMCS, taking account of local circumstances.

2.6 There are six key elements in assuring that effective arrangements are in place; these are set out in the next section.

3. Test of Assurance

3.1 Culture of Self-Evaluation:

- Dorset Council Children's Services produces a Self-Evaluation of its services for vulnerable children as part of its annual strategic planning cycle and to inform its Annual Conversation with Ofsted, the Self-Evaluation was most recently updated in March 2025, as part of the ILACS Inspection. This Self-evaluation has been shared with strategic partners through our Strategic Alliance for Children and Young People and the Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership Boards. Cabinet will receive a report in June 2025 to report on the findings and outcome of the ILACS Inspection in March 2025. The Self-Assessment is being updated in June 2025, ahead of the Annual Engagement event with Ofsted on 14th July 2025
- During the year Children's Services also refreshes its self-evaluation to support participation in regional peer challenge events and to prepare for the Ofsted Annual Conversation as part of the ILACS framework.

➤ During May 2025

	The six elements	In Dorset – current position	Evidence	Next steps
1	Clarity about how senior management arrangements ensure that the safety and the educational, social and emotional needs of children and young people are given due priority and how they enable staff to help the local authority discharge its statutory duties in an integrated and coherent way.	➤ Dorset Council has a Director of Children's Services role who is responsible for the entirety of children's services – (known locally as the Executive Director People: Children). ➤ The DCS and Children Services Leadership Team, work closely with the wider council senior leadership team. Members of the Council's senior leadership team participate in strategic partnership meetings (Dorset	➤ Self-Evaluation ➤ Children Young People and Families' Plan ➤ Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership Plan and Board minutes. ➤ Dorset Children Thrive Structure and structure charts ➤ Extended Children's Services Leadership Team and Locality arrangements	➤ Annual Engagement with Ofsted (July 2025) ➤ Continued work with the Senior Leadership Team and Partners to ensure all strategies and plans are worked to effectively. ➤ DCS and Lead Member work together and meet regularly at Strategic Boards and DCS LMCS briefings

	The six elements	In Dorset – current position	Evidence	Next steps
		Safeguarding Children Partnership and Strategic Alliance for Children and Young People). ➤ Dorset Council operates its Children's Services using a fully integrated locality approach described as the Dorset Children Thrive model – with services integrated locality teams with matrix management. Locality teams are supported by central based specialist teams and fully embedded. The Families First for Children Pathfinder programme is embedded, and we are providing peer support to other Local Authorities as part of the DfE reform of children's social care.	(Heads of Locality and Strategy) ➤ Governance and Meetings Framework ➤ Matrix management and portfolio arrangements ➤ Operational management oversight arrangements (Line of Sight, Leadership oversight, Multi-Agency Resource Panel (MARF)). ➤ Workforce Development Strategy	
2	Clarity about how the local authority intends to discharge its children's services functions and be held accountable for them from political, professional, legal and corporate perspectives (including where, for example, services are commissioned from external providers or mutualised in an arm's length body);	➤ The Director of Children's Services is directly line managed by the Chief Executive. ➤ Portfolio Holder for Children's Services – Lead Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills	➤ Council Constitution ➤ Self-evaluation ➤ Need to know and line of sight arrangements. ➤ Multi-Agency Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership Board with Corporate, partnership and	➤ The SWAP Rolling Audit Programme reviewed by SWAP with the Senior Leadership Team annually. ➤ Social Care Ombudsman and SEND tribunals and appeals – lessons learned.

	The six elements	In Dorset – current position	Evidence	Next steps
		(by supporting Lead Members providing additional capacity) and Member Champions bringing their experience and knowledge to support priorities. ➤ Director and Portfolio holder held to account by the People and Health Scrutiny Committee (chaired by a member of a minority political group) ➤ Culture of engaging in Sector Led improvement and learning opportunities and Peer Reviews.	political leadership membership. ➤ Strategic Alliance for Children and Young People Board ➤ Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements. Commissioning governance arrangements. ➤ Southwest Audit Partnership (SWAP) Audit programme this year has reviewed. ➤ Creation of the Birth to Settled Adulthood Services ➤ Joint funding arrangements with the NHS. ➤ SEND Transport ➤ SEND and Inclusion Partnership Board	➤ Annual post Area SEND Inspection annual conversation
3	The seniority of and breadth of responsibilities allocated to individual post holders and how these impact on their ability to undertake those responsibilities (especially where a local authority is considering allocating any additional functions to the DCS and LMCS posts).	➤ DCS statutory post Assisted by four Corporate Directors leading their respective portfolio areas: - ➤ Children's Social Care ➤ Education and Learning ➤ Commissioning and Partnerships.	➤ Self-evaluation. ➤ Governance and Meetings Framework setting out Portfolios. ➤ Safeguarding in Education Peer Challenge to gain assurance that joint practice with schools is effective in safeguarding vulnerable pupils in secondary schooling at risk of	➤ Inspection preparation/delivery of inspections – Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) and Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI) JTAs may review partnerships approach to: Child Exploitation, 'Front Door' Services or Early Help/Family Help

	The six elements	In Dorset – current position	Evidence	Next steps
		➤ Quality Assurance and Safeguarding	contextual harm and there is evidence of joint work in mapping and identifying risks.	➤ The ILACS includes an ‘Annual Conversation’ based on a self-evaluation Annually in the summer, where local priorities are shared with Ofsted
4	The involvement and experiences of children and young people in relation to local services;	➤ Co-production is intrinsic to the directorates and partnership’s shared values and principles ➤ Annual Survey of Children in Care ➤ Audits ➤ Youth Council and Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Council ➤ Participation of children and young people is embedded within Commissioned Services ➤ The Family Hubs programme being delivered to enable participation of and hear the voices of children, young people and families in the work within delivery of the Locality Model	➤ Self-Evaluation ➤ Dorset Safeguarding Childrens Partnership Plan ➤ Quality Assurance Framework ➤ Children, Young People and Families’ Plan and I Live in Dorset Campaign ➤ Children in Care and Care-Leavers are systematically involved in the Corporate Parenting Board ➤ Programme of feedback from children, young people and families including our Youth Voice, Youth Parliament and Youth Council	➤ Work to build upon existing activities being delivered by the Participation Team ‘Dorset Youth Voice’ ➤ This will continue to be strengthened in the Self-evaluation process ➤ Work to strengthen Feedback from children, young people and their families within audits will continue ➤ Developing Family Advisory Groups with the Expansion of Family Group Conferences ➤ Expansion of Family Rights activity though the Families First For Children Programme. ➤ Learning from Audits and Quality Assurance

	The six elements	In Dorset – current position	Evidence	Next steps
5	Clarity about child protection systems, ensuring that professional leadership and practice is robust and can be challenged on a regular basis, including an appropriate focus on offering early help and working with other agencies in doing so.	➤ Dorset Children Thrive model embedded and judged as ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted ➤ Permanent structure in place ➤ Robust strategic and operational governance arrangements in place ensuring that senior leaders have a line of sight to front line practice ➤ Learning culture and learning loop in place – continuous programme of learning from others ➤ Delivery of families First For Children Pathfinder Pilot delivered to operational delivery	➤ Self-Evaluation ➤ Dorset Children Thrive Structure impact judged as ‘Outstanding’ ➤ Partnership engagement at Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements ➤ Performance Management Framework ➤ Quality Assurance Framework ➤ Evidence of learning from others (Peer Reviews, sector led improvement, Partners in Practice) ➤ Family Help Strategy ➤ Supervision Framework ➤ Workforce Development Strategy ➤ Safeguarding Partnership Scrutiny arrangements	➤ Further strengthen services through the locality model as part of the ongoing development of the Families First Partnership Programme
6	The adequacy and effectiveness of local partnership arrangements (e.g., the local authority’s relationship with schools, the courts, children’s trust cooperation arrangements, Community Safety Partnerships, health and wellbeing boards, Youth Offending Team partnerships, police, probation,	➤ We have established clear partnership governance arrangements for shared strategic partnership plans setting the short-, medium- and long-term ambitions ➤ The Dorset Safeguarding Childrens Partnership Board	➤ Self-Evaluation. ➤ Strategic Partnership Governance arrangements. ➤ Governance and Terms of Reference: Strategic Alliance ➤ Children, Young People and Families’ Plan	➤ Further strengthen Safeguarding Partnership arrangements through the Families First Partnership Programme. ➤ To appoint a single scrutineer for Dorset

	The six elements	In Dorset – current position	Evidence	Next steps
	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements and Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences and their respective accountabilities.	and Strategic Alliance are in place. ➤ Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Plan and Annual Report. This Board has line of sight to place-based operational safeguarding groups (MASH and Child Exploitation Strategic Groups) and receive regular reports from Community Safety Partnership and Youth Offending Service ➤ Schools and educational settings are represented on all partnership safeguarding groups and sub-groups, delivering the duties of safeguarding partners	➤ Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership Board ➤ Partnership conferences held in June 2025 (Strategic Alliance Conference and Inclusion Conference) ➤ Section 11 Multi Agency Safeguarding Audits ➤ MAPPA – we have strong partnership working through representation at the Strategic MAPPA Board which is chaired between Police and Probation. ➤ Evidence – 100% compliance with MAPPA Board requirements. ➤ MARAC- Our MARAC responsibilities are delivered as a partnership through High-Risk Domestic Abuse meetings, with oversight through the HRDA Quality Assurance Group. Community Safety Partnership and Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership have oversight of this partnership work.	Safeguarding Partnership arrangements

Catherine Howe
Chief Executive, Dorset Council



Councillor Nick Ireland
Leader of Dorset Council



Jonathan Mair
Corporate Director,
Legal and Democratic Services (and
Monitoring Officer), Dorset Council



Councillor Clare Sutton
Lead Member for Children's Services,
Education and Skills, Dorset Council

