

Annual performance assessment 2007

The councils' responses

Ofsted invited all councils in England to complete a questionnaire about the annual performance assessment process 2007. Responses were received from 60 of the 150 councils.

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Executive summary

Responses to the questionnaire (Appendix 1: Annual Performance Assessment of Children's Services 2007: evaluation questionnaire for local authorities) were received from 60 of the 150 councils. The questionnaire consisted of seven questions which asked councils to give answers on a scale of 1 to 4 (where 1 is unsatisfactory and 4 is excellent), and to comment on:

- arrangements for annual performance assessment (APA) and Ofsted's communications with councils
- the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) review/self-assessment process
- dataset
- the impact of the on-site day
- the impact of APA on local services
- the time and resources required of the council
- the Tellus2 survey.

An analysis of the councils' overall grades is set out in Appendix 2. Overall, the average grade awarded in response to the questionnaire was 2.6, an outcome that suggests a good degree of satisfaction with the APA process.

The question which drew the most positive response was Question 4, inviting views on the effectiveness of the on-site day, with a quarter of the councils surveyed judging this to be excellent and two thirds considering it to be good or excellent. The responses to other questions were broadly similar, with two exceptions. Responses were the least positive regarding the costs and benefits of the process (Question 6) and of the helpfulness of the Tellus2 survey (Question 7). Only a third of the councils surveyed regarded the effectiveness of the APA as good or excellent in reducing the burden of inspection and only a quarter graded the helpfulness of the Tellus2 survey as good or excellent with another quarter judging it as inadequate.

Key findings

Question 1: How effective were the arrangements and Ofsted's communication with you?

1. Ofsted's guidance and information about the process were considered to be good or better in slightly over two thirds of the councils surveyed and only three made complaints about the handling of queries. Concerns that were raised varied according to which APA block the councils were in. The main concerns expressed were about timing – six councils took the view that the APA should be done later in the year when the data is clear and finalised – and the lack of guidance relating to the involvement of partners and the process after the feedback, including moderation. A negative response emerged from those councils for whom the APA and the joint area review processes were aligned.

The councils expressed the view that this arrangement added little value; the processes might be aligned but the basis for judgements was not the same; the overall process became unwieldy; and there was a lack of clarity about the impact of APA judgements on the joint area review and, subsequently, the impact of these judgements on the corporate assessment judgements.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ All documents and data should be available in one place (by means of some sort of intranet service). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ofsted will address the issue of availability of documentation on the website to ensure better accessibility for councils.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There should be one named contact within Ofsted with whom councils can liaise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ofsted will ensure that there is one named person to act as a single point of contact for APA queries.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review the alignment of the APA with joint area reviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ For 2008, councils having a joint area review in Blocks 18, 19, 20 and 21 will have a proportionate APA with no on-site visit. The APA for councils in these blocks will take place in the autumn after the completion of the joint area review fieldwork.

Question 2: Was the review of the Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP) a useful tool to describe and evaluate your performance for APA purposes?

2. The councils surveyed understood the value and importance of self-assessment. Over a third valued the clarity and flexibility which the guidance on the structure and content of the review offered. A similar number, however, requested a tighter framework, perhaps a word limited template or standard format. Although the actual guidance on reviewing the CYPP drew little criticism, well over a third of the councils said a review of the CYPP was not, by itself, a sufficient or appropriate preparation for the APA. Undertaking a CYPP review does not match the APA self-assessment criteria; the audience for the CYPP review is very different to that for an APA self-assessment. The CYPP is essentially a partnership plan, whereas the APA focuses on councils’ contributions, and so there is a fundamental lack of alignment. This lack of alignment resulted in councils doing extensive additional work, drawing up what they acknowledged to be over-long documents in preparation for the APA. Almost a quarter of the councils felt the process became unwieldy and unnecessarily time consuming.

3. Those councils (approximately half) which referred in their responses specifically to the key question on whether non-council partners had been involved in completing the review had all taken that opportunity, despite the awareness that the APA was focused on the performance of the council.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Although many welcomed flexibility, most respondents asked for a word limited template, or a tighter framework, for self-assessment. Councils wished for more clarity about length and content. ■ The self-assessment process should acknowledge what is a council's role and responsibility and what is a partnership responsibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ofsted will prepare and circulate guidance for self-assessment should councils choose to take up this option. However, should a council prefer it, the CYPP review will remain an acceptable method of self-assessment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Establish a website link to the latest grade criteria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The grade criteria will be published together with other documents on the Ofsted website.

Question 3: How effective was the summary of baseline indicators in helping you analyse your performance this year?

4. Two suggestions for inclusion in the baseline indicators were out-of-county placements and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service waiting times; otherwise the councils surveyed appeared reasonably content with the summary. Over half the councils supported the inclusion of measures that reflected the National Indicator Set (NIS). Although there were expressions of caution at this stage these councils felt that inclusion of these measures was inevitable, essential and important, and that to do otherwise would run counter to the Government's expressed intentions for local government performance management. There were also calls for the data used by the different external moderation and inspection systems to become more aligned and coherent.
5. Only two councils graded the effectiveness of the summary of baseline indicators as inadequate. Six councils wanted a reduction in the size of the dataset and there was a similar number of calls for early guidance on the indicators to be used in 2008. The timing of the data release was the main cause of concern. For several councils the data came well after their analysis and self-assessment. For others the complaint was that much of it was out of date by the time of the APA. On some occasions it came after the on-site visit. Although acknowledging that it was good to have data early there were,

paradoxically, concerns about the work caused by having multiple revisions. The PDF format was a cause of complaint and there was some concern about the paucity of data for Outcome 4, 'Making a Positive Contribution'.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Early information and guidance on the data system to be used in 2008. ■ Alignment to and rationalisation with NIS and other external data, to reduce the dataset and bring more coherence across different processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The number of key judgements and performance indicators is being revised and reduced for 2008 and, where appropriate, these will be aligned with the NIS.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Datasets and surveys should be available in time for the self-assessment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Most social care and youth justice data are not available until later in the year, so the validated dataset will not be available in time for the self-assessment deadline.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review the timing and system of issuing multiple versions: restrict to two versions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ An initial dataset comprising all indicators will be available in April, and an updated version with validated data will be available in late September.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure greater clarity on the use and admissibility of performance data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There will be clear guidance about the use of unvalidated data. In line with previous years, and leading up to Comprehensive Area Assessment, the APA year will be the same as previous years: up to the end of March.

Question 4: How effective was the on-site day in allowing you to discuss key areas of concern and understand the trail of evidence leading to provisional judgements?

6. The councils surveyed gave their most positive responses to this question. Two thirds of the councils judged the effectiveness of the day as good or excellent. Practical arrangements worked smoothly and the information available in advance was regarded as sufficient and appropriate. However, over a third of councils expressed concerns that there was not enough time between the inspector's telephone call and the visit itself. The problems for councils were not so much in preparing their responses to the issues identified as having to

block out many people's diaries for a long time in advance and, when eventually it became clear who was required, getting the right people (especially from partner organisations) in the right place at the right time.

7. Just over half of the councils referred to a robust, constructive dialogue with inspectors. This was one of the most positive messages from the APA overall. However, nine respondents who had a joint area review taking place at the same time questioned the point of the APA; others felt that discussions on the day were too focused on data and some felt the feedback on the day was not useful or was insufficient.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There should be more time between the telephone call outlining the agenda and the on-site visit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regrettably, the total time available for Ofsted to undertake APAs in 2008 means that, for those councils having an on-site day, inspectors must give the same notice as last year.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The focus of the visit should be clarified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To ensure better consistency, guidance will clarify the focus of the meeting for those councils where an on-site visit takes place.

Question 5: How effective was the process in identifying key areas for improving council services' contribution to outcomes for children and young people?

8. Councils in the survey were evenly split on this question. Almost half of the councils said that the APA confirmed what they already knew; or that they did not need the APA and that having the process was a burden. Three councils expressed the view that, compared with a joint area review, an APA added little and that it was too data-driven with a tendency to focus on data issues in a way that skewed judgements and lost sight of the strategic overview. In marked contrast to these negative views, similar numbers – roughly half – of councils in the survey felt that having this external validation was useful, helpful and reassuring, and that the APA contributed to their prioritisation. The APA's main usefulness was seen to lie in the opportunity to bring partners more into the arena, the APA's emphasis on outcomes being particularly useful.
9. Overall, almost two thirds judged the process good or excellent in helping them to identify key areas for improving services. Strong concerns were expressed about the APA being just one of many forms of external moderation and inspection to which councils are subjected, and that these are not well aligned

or coherent. Preparation for each of them was more or less a separate exercise, yet one that involved senior managers in repetitive work. Inspectors conducting APAs, while good in many ways, took little heed of other types of inspection or moderation or were not aware of them. Furthermore, the APA as it is established does not reflect the fact that services to children and young people are now very much a matter of partnership; the APA does not make a council's partners accountable for their engagement or their contribution.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Work must be done by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Ofsted and other agencies to rationalise and align the different types of external moderation and inspection to which councils are subjected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ APA developments and inspector training will seek to ensure that other types of external moderation and inspection are taken into account where appropriate. ■ The views from councils will be fed into the Comprehensive Area Assessment consultation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If the APA continues, it must acknowledge that a review of the CYPP goes beyond what a council is responsible for. Thus the APA must adapt, or its focus must narrow. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In this, the last year of APA, there will be no change to the overall purpose, which is to report on the council's children's services and the specific contributions they make to improving outcomes.

Question 6: How effective do you think this year's APA was in reducing the burden of inspection overall?

10. In response to the first key question prompt (the benefits from the APA in improving outcomes) six councils said there were no direct benefits at all. However, a similar number felt that the benefit lay in the emphasis of the APA on outcomes for children and young people: this approach influences the mindset and approach of many managers and partners in a powerful and helpful way.
11. In assessing which part of the APA was most burdensome the councils surveyed identified the review of the CYPP as the most demanding element, especially as this was not a sufficiently effective way of preparing. The data analysis, which had to be repeated when data was reissued, was also referred to as a burden by several councils. On the other hand, eight councils did not regard the APA as burdensome at all. They saw it as a valuable exercise in review and evaluation and something that they would do anyway. What did unite councils was the view that the overall burden of the various external inspections and moderation processes was far too heavy and that, as mentioned previously, they were not sufficiently integrated or coherent. High

performing councils took the view that they, in particular, did not need to be subject to such inspection regimes.

12. Where joint area reviews and the APA were aligned, views were very mixed on whether this reduced duplication. Five councils said it reduced duplication, nine that it did not. In a few cases it was seen to add to the burden. The view often depended on which block the council was in.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ofsted should consider whether some form of differentiated, risk-based approach is appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Differentiated and proportionate APAs are planned. Risk assessment, based on previous performance and the accuracy of self-assessment, will govern the level of scrutiny given to each APA, including whether an on-site visit or other type of contact is needed or not.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Review the timing so that it links more closely to council planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ It has not been possible to review the timing of the APA due to the timing of data collection.

Question 7: How helpful was it to the APA process to have the views of children and young people collected through the Tellus2 survey?

13. Almost a third of the councils surveyed said that the burden of conducting the survey outweighed its benefits. This was twice the number of those that responded with an opposite view. Major concerns were expressed about a number of aspects: the lack of involvement of stakeholders; the short notice given; the timing, both for schools and for councils themselves; the appropriateness of some questions; and the problems caused by the website. The councils were concerned that these issues led to a poor return which invalidated the whole exercise. Seven councils thought the sample was not sufficiently inclusive or representative. However, councils clearly felt strongly that gathering the views of children and young people was important and generally, although councils have their own systems, they saw the value in gathering national comparisons. The councils seemed to want such a survey to work, and felt they could help make it work.
14. Five councils expressed concerns about safety and confidentiality issues. In terms of the questions which were found most valuable, answers ranged widely, with safety and bullying areas getting the most responses. There were very few suggestions for additional questions.

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To be useful, the survey must have a larger, more inclusive and representative sample. ■ Improve the performance and reliability of the supporting website. ■ Consider how the survey can be made more inclusive, particularly with regard to children and young people and sixth formers with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Feedback from councils has been passed on to the Tellus3 planning group. Improvements being planned include: a shorter questionnaire; longer timescale for completion; gathering views from children and young people who attend special schools; improved IT server.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Involve stakeholders more fully in the planning process and review the timing of the survey. ■ Provide incentives for schools to take part, particularly feedback to individual schools. ■ Review the survey from the perspective of safety and confidentiality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Other developments are still under consideration. A letter outlining the arrangements for 2008 has been circulated to councils.

Additional comments

15. About half the councils which participated in the survey made additional comments. Six of the councils took the opportunity to praise the inspectors who had led the process.
16. Councils made a number of additional points:

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Concerns about the moderation process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ofsted recognises that there were difficulties around communication of the moderation procedure in 2007. Changes made to internal processes will promote better communication without detracting from the purpose of moderation – which is to ensure a consistent and rigorous approach, with judgements well supported by accurate analysis and evaluation of the full range of admissible evidence.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Briefings not being available to councils on time (even though inspectors had them). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ofsted expects that those providing briefings will ensure that the council has seen the content but, as a check, all briefings will be made available to each council before the APA takes place.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Linkage to fostering and adoption inspection. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Inspection outcomes of these services will be available for 2008. Ofsted will also make use of the information from serious case reviews.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Letters raising issues that had not been discussed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ As a desk-based process it is inevitable that there will be issues arising in the letter which have not been discussed with a council. Ofsted will ensure that compelling evidence is presented to back up judgements.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide greater clarity about grounds for representation and feedback on the number and outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This section of the handbook will be reviewed to ensure that the grounds for representation are clear. A summary of representation outcomes could be reported in the APA report to be published later in the year.

Notes

The questionnaire sent to councils was based on that used in 2006 to enable any ongoing changes to be noted in the impact of the assessment process. All authorities undertaking an APA were invited to respond and 60 did so. All types of council (London and metropolitan, borough, unitary and county councils) were represented in the responses and there was a geographical spread.

Responses were analysed by grade as in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Councils were also asked to provide qualitative comments in response to a number of questions, together with any suggestions for improvements. These are reported in the main body of the report as text and tables.

Further information

An outline of the annual performance assessment process for 2007 is available on the Ofsted website:

Arrangements for annual performance assessment 2007

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070039>

Annual performance assessment 2007: handbook of procedures

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070038>

Annual performance assessment letters for each of the authorities subject to the process in 2007 can be found through the inspection link on the Ofsted website:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/portal/site/Internet/menuitem.4ee124d1333d1e23b218d71008c08a0c/?vgnextoid=15df764e0f32b010VgnVCM100000960f430aRCRD>

A report on the outcomes of the 2007 APAs will be published in May 2008.

Appendix 1. Annual Performance Assessment of Children's Services 2007

Evaluation questionnaire for local authorities

This year Ofsted conducted the third annual assessment of performance of children's services as part of the Integrated Children's Services Framework. By the end of next year the cycle of joint area reviews will be complete and we will have done the final annual performance assessments (APAs) before the implementation of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

Ofsted wishes to ensure that the final APA is more light-touch and that it takes account of feedback from local authorities. We therefore envisage some differences in the final last year. At the same time we recognise that we need to implement a process which:

- continues to focus on the *Every Child Matters* outcomes
- is open to scrutiny
- is sufficiently robust to provide a position statement that is considered in the annual priorities meetings with the DCSF children's services advisers
- will continue to provide the children's services grade for Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) purposes.

We are keen to hear about your experience of the 2007 APA process and to compare responses with those from last year. What follows is a brief questionnaire, similar to the one you completed in 2006, which invites you to **rate** on a scale of 1 to 4 (where 1 is unsatisfactory and 4 is excellent), and **give us your comments** on:

- the arrangements for APA and our communication with you
- the CYPP review/self-assessment process
- the dataset
- engagement with the APA inspectors
- the impact of APA on local services
- the time and resources it took the council
- the Tellus2 survey.

We would particularly welcome **comments and views** on **what worked well, what did not and why**. Please also give us your suggestions for how any problems might be overcome.

If you want to raise additional points not covered in the questionnaire there is space for you to include these at the end.

Please return an electronic version of this questionnaire to [Regional APA address to be inserted] by 19 December 2007 if possible. However, we will accept responses up to 3 January 2008.

We aim to produce a summary of the results of the evaluation and what actions we propose to take as a result, early in the New Year.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any APA matter please email APA@ofsted.gov.uk

Name of local authority:
Name of person completing the response:
Position :
Contact details:

1. The arrangements for APA and our communication with you

	Rating (1–4)
How effective were the arrangements and our communication with you?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>a) Did the guidance and information you received about the APA clearly explain what was involved and what you were expected to do?</p> <p>b) Were you able to get queries answered and clarified?</p> <p>c) Did the process as you experienced it match your expectations from the guidance you received?</p> <p>d) Where the APA and JAR processes were aligned, was the guidance for conducting the two processes clear?</p>
Comments
What improvements could be made to the arrangements and our communication with you?

2. The self-assessment process

	Rating (1–4)
Do you think the review of the children and young people's plan (CYPP) was a useful tool to describe and evaluate your performance for APA purposes?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>a) Was the guidance provided sufficiently clear to enable you to complete the review of the CYPP?</p> <p>b) Were you able to make effective use of the review of the CYPP to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ explain the context in which your council is working ■ focus on outcomes for children and young people in your area ■ identify clearly your council services' strengths and areas for development in contributing to outcomes for children and young people ■ explain the gaps or inconsistencies in the evidence or data that was available to the APA team? <p>c) Were you able to involve non-council partners (e.g. health, voluntary and community sectors) in completing the council's review?</p>
Comments
What improvements might be made to the self-assessment process?

3. The dataset

	Rating (1–4)
How effective was the Summary of Baseline Indicators in helping you analyse your performance this year?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>a) We intend to refine the current dataset and make it smaller. What other non-baseline indicators would need to be included in the Baseline set?</p> <p>b) Would it be useful to include, where possible, measures reflecting the National Indicator Set (NIS)?</p>
Comments
What improvements could be made to the dataset?

4. The on-site day

	Rating (1–4)
How effective was the on-site day in allowing you to discuss key areas of concern and understand the trail of evidence leading to provisional judgements?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>a) Did the practical arrangements work smoothly?</p> <p>b) Did you have enough information about the content of the day for you to prepare sufficiently and have the right people available?</p> <p>c) Were you able to have a constructive dialogue about your authority's performance?</p> <p>d) Do you think that the work undertaken during the on-site day was necessary or could have been achieved in another way?</p>
Comments
What improvements could be made to the on-site day?

5. The impact of APA on local services

	Rating (1–4)
How effective was the process in identifying key areas for improving council services' contribution to outcomes for children and young people?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>Did you think the APA was helpful to the council and local services in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ reviewing and taking forward work to bring about greater coordination of children's services ■ improving the quality of services ■ evaluating the impact of local services on outcomes for children and young people?
Comments
What improvements could be made to better identify key areas for development?

6. Costs and benefits to you of the APA process

	Rating (1–4)
How effective do you think this year's APA was in 'reducing the burden' of inspection overall?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>a) What benefits have you identified from the APA in improving outcomes for children and young people?</p> <p>b) Which part of the APA process was most burdensome for your local authority?</p> <p>c) Where can additional savings be made in costs and staff time for APA 2008?</p> <p>d) Where applicable, did the alignment of the APA and JAR processes reduce duplication in provision of evidence and communication between the authority and the council?</p>
Comments
What improvements could be made to the costs and benefits of the APA?

7. Tellus2 Children and Young People's Survey

	Rating (1–4)
How helpful was it to the APA process to have the views of children and young people collected through the Tellus2 survey?	

<p>Key questions</p> <p>a) Did the 'burden' of conducting the Tellus2 survey outweigh the benefits?</p> <p>b) Which information from Tellus2 did you find most valuable?</p> <p>c) Were there any questions that should have been asked in the Tellus2 survey that were not?</p>
Comments
What improvements could be made to the Tellus2 survey?

8. Additional points

Are there any additional points or comments you wish to make?

We may wish to seek more detailed feedback about aspects of the process in order to further develop procedures for next year. **Please indicate below** if you would be willing to be involved in giving some more detailed feedback and discussions in relation to:

Guidance and our communication with you	
The dataset and performance indicators	
Self-assessment	
Tellus2	

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please send your response to [(insert regional APA email address)]

Appendix 2. Councils' overall grades

	Grade 1 Inadequate	Grade 2 Satisfactory	Grade 3 Good	Grade 4 Excellent
1) How effective were the arrangements and our communication with you?	1	16	35	7
2) Do you think the review of the children and young people's plan (CYPP) was a useful tool to describe and evaluate your performance for APA purposes?	2	19	22	14
3) How effective was the summary of baseline indicators in helping you analyse your performance this year?	2	22	26	7
4) How effective was the on-site day in allowing you to discuss key areas of concern and understand the trail of evidence leading to provisional judgements?	4	13	25	15
5) How effective was the process in identifying key areas for improving council services' contribution to outcomes for children and young people?	5	15	33	5
6) How effective do you think this year's APA was in reducing the burden of inspection overall?	12	26	18	3
7) How helpful was it to the APA process to have the views of children and young people collected through the Tellus2 survey?	15	25	11	4