

Annual performance assessment 2008

Report on outcomes

This report summarises the outcomes from the 2008 annual performance assessment (APA) of local authorities' services for children and young people.

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Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Executive summary

This report is based on the published outcomes of the annual performance assessments (APAs) of all 150 councils in England that were carried out in 2008. It provides an overview of key themes that emerged in the year, while highlighting strengths and weaknesses. It also makes particular reference to each of the five Every Child Matters outcome areas and councils' capacity to improve further.

APAs have been conducted over a period of four years, with 2008 being the last year. The focus of this APA report is on the contribution that council services made in the reporting year of April 2007 to March 2008 towards improving outcomes for children and young people. A range of published evidence, including data and performance indicators, was considered alongside the councils' reviews of their progress. No fieldwork activities were undertaken. The grade awarded provides the rating for the children and young people's service block in the Audit Commission's annual Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

An evaluation of the 2007 APA, which took into account councils' views, led to the introduction of differentiated and proportionate APAs in 2008. As a result the number of key judgements on which inspectors reported was reduced, the dataset used was narrower and more tightly focused than in previous years, and not all councils had an onsite visit.

In 2007, 137 councils had an APA and the remaining 13 councils had a joint area review (JAR). For these latter councils the JAR grades were reviewed as part of the APA process before being carried forward for the Audit Commission's annual CPA. Of the 150 councils that had an APA in 2008, 32 had an APA following the completion of the JAR fieldwork. The information gathered as part of the JAR was used as part of the evidence base for the APA.

In each APA, grades are awarded for:

- the council's children's services overall and the specific contributions they make to improving outcomes for children and young people
- the contribution that these services make towards improving each of the five Every Child Matters outcome areas (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being)
- the council's capacity to improve these services further.

The summary of grades awarded for 2008 is as follows (2007 figure in brackets):

| | Outstanding | Good | Adequate | Inadequate |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Children's services | 9 (12) | 100 (101) | 37 (37) | 4 (0) |
| Capacity to improve | 33 (30) | 81 (97) | 32 (23) | 4 (0) |
| Being healthy | 18 (13) | 99 (105) | 31 (32) | 2 (0) |
| Staying safe | 17 (12) | 84 (90) | 41 (43) | 8 (5) |
| Enjoying and achieving | 13 (12) | 92 (98) | 40 (40) | 5 (0) |
| Making a positive contribution | 37 (32) | 101 (102) | 12 (16) | 0 (0) |
| Achieving economic well-being | 17 (13) | 102 (108) | 28 (28) | 3 (1) |

Evidence from the fourth year of APA, 2008, shows that while some aspects of children's services were better than previous years, the grade profile overall was not as positive as in 2007. Four councils were making an inadequate contribution to improving outcomes overall.

In terms of the five individual outcome areas of Every Child Matters the decline in performance between 2007 and 2008 was more marked in both staying safe and enjoying and achieving, with more councils graded inadequate than in previous years.

Being healthy

Further improvements were made to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the Healthy Schools initiative continued to progress well. The health provision and outcomes for some groups of particularly vulnerable children and young people continued to improve, although concerns persist in many areas. For example, there were substantial inconsistencies between councils in the rate of progress to reduce teenage conceptions and in access to specialist therapy services.

Staying safe

In staying safe, the number of inadequate serious case reviews raises important concerns for a few councils about the effectiveness of processes for ensuring that lessons are learned. Furthermore, there are worrying concerns about aspects of service responsiveness, such as the rising trend in repeat referrals. This is balanced

by improvements in some key indicators such as the declining trend nationally in the number of children in council care.

Enjoying and achieving

In 2008, attainment at Key Stage 4 continued to rise slightly and the overall effectiveness of schools as judged by school inspections showed improvement. Early years provision and school attendance were also areas of improvement. However, insufficient progress is being made to close the gap between most children and those in more vulnerable groups. This is especially the case for looked after children, whose attainment and attendance remain major concerns, as is the situation regarding their exclusion from school.

Making a positive contribution

Efforts to involve children and young people in real decision-making about services that affect their lives were becoming further developed and embedded. Encouraging results stemmed from multi-agency approaches to preventing anti-social and offending behaviour. The good contribution of youth services in engaging young people aged 13 to 19 and youth offending services continued to be recognised. Trends in offending behaviour remained variable across the country and reoffending rates continued to be the major concern in many areas.

Achieving economic well-being

The achievements of young people aged over 16 continued to improve, as shown in the completion of apprenticeships and the proportion reaching Levels 2 and 3 by the age of 19. Good progress was made by most 14 to 19 strategic partnerships in implementing the new diplomas. However, the picture across the country was highly variable and in 71 (47%) of council areas, some aspect of post-16 engagement was identified as an area for development. While support and outcomes for care leavers were showing some improvement in some areas, there is still more to do. For example, the percentage of care leavers living outside council boundaries remained static at around 12%. In 2008, while the proportion of young people aged over 16 not in education, employment or training continued to fall, there was substantial variation between areas; a disproportionately high number not in education, employment or training were the most potentially vulnerable young people, for example those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Capacity to improve, including service management

The best councils continued to take the lead in developing locally based, coherent and cost-effective partnership arrangements that focused on the urgent and complex needs of the most potentially vulnerable groups. There is a high correlation between the best performing councils and those that had sustainable and effective mechanisms for listening to and acting in concert with local people, including children and young people. However, workforce concerns that have been raised in previous

reports are gathering momentum. The quality and sufficiency of social care workers is the key concern. In 30 (20%) councils, performance management was not embedded, and was inconsistent or not sufficiently supported by management information systems. This too was raised as an area for development in 2007. Too often councils' self-evaluation lacked rigour and challenge, with strengths overstated and weaknesses not clearly analysed or addressed.

Key findings

The majority of councils provided good-quality children's services, often in difficult circumstances. The best councils demonstrated clearly what can be achieved where councils have high expectations, rigorous and honest self-evaluation and robust quality assurance measures that focus on impact and outcomes.

Many councils' self-evaluation underestimated some important weaknesses, which resulted in councils giving themselves higher grades than those awarded by inspectors. In 2008, inspectors agreed with only 95 (63%) of councils' own grades for overall effectiveness, while in 2007 they agreed with 109 (73%) of councils' own grades. For capacity to improve, including the management of children's services, there was an even greater divergence between the inspectors' and councils' self-evaluations. In 2008, inspectors agreed with the self-evaluation in only 84 (56%) councils, while in 2007 the figure was 105 (70%).

Key strengths from 2008 included the following:

- The involvement of young people in the development of improved health services was a strong feature in the best councils.
- The percentage of referrals of children in need that led to initial assessments has continued to rise steadily over the past few years to almost 60% in 2008. Further, core assessments, based on a rate per 10,000 population, saw a positive increase for a fifth consecutive year to a rate of 96%. The percentage of core assessments completed within 35 working days of their commencement also improved to 80%.
- There was an improving trend towards fostering, adoption and special guardianships rather than residential placements for looked after children.
- The rate of children with a child protection plan has increased year on year for the three years to 2008, as has the actual number of children with a child protection plan, which in 2008 stood higher than in any of the previous six years
- In the 2007/08 Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests, the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 or above, the standard expected for their age, increased by one percentage point to 80%. In mathematics and science there were also increases of one percentage point in attainment at Level 4 or above, to 77% and 88%, respectively. The proportion of young people nationally achieving five or more GCSE grades A* to C in maintained schools

increased by three percentage points from 57% to 60%. The percentage achieving five or more GCSE A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, also increased from 44% to 46%.

- The number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system reduced by 20% from 24,932 in April 2007 to 19,441 in March 2008.
- At Level 2 and/or Level 3, 84 councils (56%) were judged to have good or improving achievements. Good progress had been made in implementing the 14 to 19 strategy. Improved partnership working was leading to the development of a wider range of vocational pathways, increased involvement of employers and the successful introduction and extension of diploma programmes. There was a 10% increase in the number of young people completing apprenticeships since 2007.

Areas for improvement include the following:

- The rate of teenage conceptions remained too high or was not reducing quickly enough in nearly half of all councils. In 16 councils, the rate was increasing.
- Despite improvements in the allocation of looked after children to a named person qualified as a social worker, 35 councils were achieving less than 98% allocations and seven had less than 80% allocated.
- Levels of adoption for looked after children had continued to fall and the proportion carried out within 12 months of the decision to do so was declining.
- Despite improving trends in long- and short-term stability indicators for children in care, with fewer movements within the year and placements lasting longer, there remains much room for further improvement.
- Repeat referrals of children in need rose nationally to just over 24%, the highest percentage figure for seven years. Further to this, 42 councils showed repeat referrals to be over the national average, at 26%. This brings into question whether or not a child is being given the appropriate level of service at the first contact, resulting in the need for re-referral.
- The timely completion of initial assessments is not good enough. Two thirds of councils completed less than 80% of initial assessments of children who were referred to them as being in need within the expected seven days.
- Gaps continued between the attainment of boys and girls. Girls outperformed boys in reading and writing at Key Stage 1 and English at Key Stage 3, while boys outperformed girls in mathematics at Key Stage 2.
- Although the proportion nationally of looked after children sitting at least one GCSE examination was rising, the variation between councils was too wide. The gap in attainment between looked after children and all school children was narrowing at Key Stage 2 but getting wider at age 16 for one

A* to G and five A* to C at GCSE. The rate of absence from school among looked after children continued to be very high and the number permanently excluded from school, while small, was disproportionate when compared with all children. Of those eligible, 13% missed 25 or more days in school in 2008.

- The overall participation rate of young offenders in education, employment or training, at 71.1%, was considerably lower than the Youth Justice Board target of 90%.
- For the three previous years, there was little change in the proportion of looked after children receiving a final warning or conviction. At nearly 10% it remained above the target of 7.2% that was meant to be achieved by 2004.
- Although improving, at 13.7%, the proportion of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16 to 19 who were not involved in education, employment or training was too high and much higher than the figure for all young people aged 16 to 18 of 6.7%.

Recommendations

The following overarching recommendations are intended to help councils and their partners in pursuing service improvement. In most cases these recommendations were identified as areas for improvement in the 2007 report and they remain areas of concern for 2008.

- Raise the profile of improving opportunities for, and outcomes of, the most potentially vulnerable children and young people. This will include being more rigorous and challenging in self-evaluation and improving performance management arrangements to make better use of comparative information and external scrutiny.
- Improve the quality of serious case reviews and implement more rigorous processes to ensure that lessons are learned and lead to better safeguarding of children and young people.
- Implement a more rigorous and challenging approach to ensure that looked after children and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are afforded the same opportunities to make progress and excel as their peers, and that their school attendance, exclusion levels, progress and attainment improve.
- Reduce the proportion of looked after children and young people involved with the youth justice system, either as first-time offenders or as reoffenders.
- Improve young people's access to sexual health services and the quality of education, advice and support they receive through schools and wider children's services, to reduce the rate of teenage conceptions and sexually transmitted infections.

- Implement immediate and longer-term national and local workforce development strategies and monitoring arrangements to improve the quality and sufficiency of the social care workforce.

Evaluation of outcome areas

Being healthy

Summary of performance

1. Overall inspection evidence from the 2008 APA presented a slightly worse picture than in 2007. Two councils were inadequate for being healthy, whereas no councils were judged inadequate in the previous two years. There is evidence of some improvements in mental health services and better collaboration to meet the health needs of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities but strategies to reduce the incidence of teenage conceptions were not sufficiently effective in many areas.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Good progress towards providing better CAMHS was found in 96 councils. Access to these services had improved, with reductions in waiting times and improved 24-hour provision. In the best areas there was an increasing emphasis on providing services for potentially vulnerable groups, including children and young people who had learning difficulties and/or disabilities, looked after children and young offenders.
- Improving health support and better health outcomes for looked after children featured as a major strength in 91 councils. Of these, in 53 councils, the proportion of looked after children receiving annual health and/or dental checks was either high or higher than statistical and national comparators. A strong feature in the best councils was the involvement of young people in the development of improved health services.
- Participation and accreditation in the Healthy Schools programme has continued to grow from the very good position reported in 2007. The success of this initiative in improving the amount of school time being allocated to sport and physical education was a strength in a few councils.
- Similar to 2007, the support of health services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was strong in 32 council areas. Key features included: integrated health teams and multi-agency work; clearer transition plans; and the role of lead professionals. The effectiveness of these features was most noticeable in the early identification of the need for specialist therapy support for children who had the most severe and complex needs.
- Partnership working was good or improving in many areas. Joint strategies were based increasingly on the effective analysis of data to establish local needs. As a result, resources were targeted on meeting agreed priorities,

including through joint commissioning and especially for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In a few areas children's centres clearly demonstrated how effective partnership work can benefit these children.

- The increasing effectiveness of multi-agency working was also evident in the approach to substance or alcohol misuse services. In the best examples effective health education programmes were supported by improving access to treatment programmes.

Areas for improvement and barriers to success

- Teenage conception rates remain high and the pace of reduction is too slow. In 74 council areas the APA found that the strategy to reduce the number of conceptions was not effective enough. In 16 councils the rate actually increased and strategies being employed to reduce conception rates were not effective enough. Sexual health provision or sex and relationships education was poor in a few areas, where, for example, there was inequitable provision of advice and poor rates of screening for chlamydia.
- In 14 councils the APA found only slow progress towards providing a comprehensive CAMHS. Specific aspects of provision were weak, including non-specialist services, 24-hour cover, and services for 16–17-year-old young people and for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The most frequent shortcomings were in the access for older children to specialist therapy services, including physiotherapy and occupational therapy, and in provision for children and young people who had autistic spectrum disorders.
- Although health support for looked after children is improving nationally, in 22 council areas the APA found this provision to be an area of weakness. Here, councils did not adequately fulfil their corporate parenting responsibility in ensuring that looked after children had annual health and dental checks, adequate CAMHS support and access to substance misuse services.
- While increasing participation in the healthy schools initiative is a strength in many councils, there remains much to do to tackle increasingly high levels of obesity in children and young people.

Staying safe

Summary of performance

2. Overall, evidence from the 2008 APA presents staying safe as an area of concern. Eight councils were judged to be making an inadequate contribution to keeping children safe. This is a worse situation than in 2007, when five councils were judged inadequate.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- In 37 councils, the quality of the leadership provided by the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) emerged well from the 2008 APA, in spite of national concerns about individual cases. The strategic leadership provided by the boards and the partnership arrangements facilitated through their creation were identified as particular strengths.
- The clear focus on preventative work and early intervention identified in 2007 continues and was a frequently identified strength of provision. Collaborative arrangements, such as the implementation of the common assessment framework, had improved.
- The number of children looked after by councils is declining, albeit slightly. In a number of APAs, this reduction was ascribed to the growing effectiveness of prevention and early intervention strategies. In all, 57 councils were judged to have good or improving procedures, such as the timeliness of case reviews and the improving provision of personal advisers and planning for care leavers.
- Councils' fostering and adoption services were generally good and there was an improving trend towards fostering, adoption and special guardianship orders rather than residential placements. Although nationally the actual numbers of looked after children who are adopted have fallen, the rate of adoptions has continued to improve.
- The better councils, working jointly with their partners, continued to devote resources to address domestic violence and work to combat bullying in schools.

Areas for improvement and barriers to success

- Eight councils were judged to be making an inadequate contribution to ensure that children and young people stay safe; this is the largest number to be judged inadequate in any outcome area since the advent of the APA process. This is of major concern.
- In 14 council areas, the APA raised concerns regarding the effectiveness and leadership of the LSCBs. A recurring number of important weaknesses and failures were common for all councils with an inadequate staying safe grade, in particular:
 - the timeliness with which important child protection processes were completed
 - placement provision for looked after children
 - the inadequate allocation of social workers
 - confusion or misapplication of thresholds for social care.
- Although there were improvements in many aspects of child protection work considerable weaknesses remained in many council areas. In 80 councils

there were either rising trends or continued high levels of repeat referrals. For many councils the timeliness of child protection processes also remained a weakness. These included not meeting expectations for carrying out initial and core assessments and not holding reviews for looked after children on time.

- Eleven councils were identified in APA letters as having important weaknesses in relation to serious case reviews. Concerns included the timeliness in completing serious case reviews; the rigour with which these reviews were conducted; and whether procedures were sufficiently well established or if they were complying with government guidelines. In three assessments, inspectors judged that the councils were not systematically applying learning from their reviews or giving sufficient priority to implementing necessary changes.
- Despite improving trends in long- and short-term stability indicators, with fewer movements within year and placements lasting longer, there remains much room for further improvement. This is particularly true for long-term placements, with only two councils achieving the national public service agreement target of 80%, while 59 councils reported less than 65% achievement.
- In 2007, the APA outcomes report highlighted a concern about the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers. It remains of concern that too many councils do not allocate a named person who is qualified as a social worker to each looked after child and, in a few councils, to those on the child protection register.
- In 17 councils, weaknesses were identified in safeguarding for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The majority of these stemmed from poor performance regarding the statutory duty to provide these young people with a transition plan at age 14 between children and adult services, linked to insufficient integration between these services.

Enjoying and achieving

Summary of performance

3. Overall, the 2008 APAs showed a weaker performance profile than in the previous year. Five councils were judged inadequate in this outcome area; none was judged inadequate in 2007. The number of councils judged to be making a good or outstanding contribution was 105 (70%), compared with 110 (73%) in 2007. This weaker picture is highly regrettable since it often relates to insufficient progress being made in closing the gap in achievement by the most vulnerable groups, especially looked after children and their peers. Further, this was highlighted as an area requiring improvement in the APA outcomes report in 2007.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Attainments at the end of each key stage had improved in most council areas. For a minority of councils this represented progress from standards that had previously been identified as being below or well below the national average. Overall, standards in English, mathematics and science at Key Stage 2 continued to improve slowly. Similarly the proportion of young people achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, or equivalent, continued to rise, as did the proportion achieving five or more of these higher grades, including English and mathematics.
- Early years provision was improving, although there were wide variations across the country. In over 60 councils, improvements in early years provision and achievement were noted as strengths compared with the poor picture detailed in the 2007 APA report.
- School attendance improved, with the rate of absence falling in both primary and secondary schools compared with 2007.
- Overall, the quality of councils' school provision was improving. In 53 of the APAs, inspectors reported a low or declining number of schools in an Ofsted category of concern, or reported on the improving grade profile for the schools in the area following Ofsted inspections. Fewer assessments identified this aspect as a weakness compared with 2007. The improving inspection picture was also reported in the Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08, where 64% of mainstream schools were found to be good or outstanding. This is a slightly higher figure than in 2006/07.

Areas for improvement and barriers to success

- The educational attainment of looked after children was identified as a major weakness in 78 councils. Considerable efforts had been made to introduce improvements and new initiatives, for example the creation of virtual schools, which were beginning to have an effect. However, it remained the case that the attainment of these children and young people was far below that of others. In some respects the gap was growing and huge inequalities persisted. Although the proportion of looked after children nationally sitting at least one GCSE examination, or equivalent, continued to rise year on year, the variation between councils was too wide. While the numbers of eligible looked after children who sat at least one GCSE or equivalent were often small, compared with the national average of 67.7%, the variation between councils ranged from 44.1% to 94.1%. The gap in attainment between looked after children and all school children was narrowing at the end of Key Stage 2 but getting wider at age 16 for those achieving one GCSE at grades A* to G, and five or more at grades A* to C. National data shows that nearly 3% of all school children have a statement

of special educational need, but this rises to just under 28% for looked after children; this difference has not changed much over the past three years.

- The school attendance of looked after children was also too low, especially in 22 council areas where the APA identified this as a considerable concern. Overall, the percentage of looked after children missing 25 or more days of school in 2008 declined slightly compared with 2007, but remained too high at 13%.
- Although there had been a very slight decline overall in the number of permanent exclusions from secondary schools, fixed-term exclusions in primary and secondary schools had risen. Furthermore, too many councils were not fulfilling their responsibility to provide adequate education for children and young people who were permanently excluded. The number of looked after children permanently excluded from school was inevitably small, but it continued to be disproportionate compared with other children and in a very small minority of councils was highlighted as an area of concern. For children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities 21 councils had both fixed and permanent exclusion rates that had risen or remained too high.

Making a positive contribution

Summary of performance

4. In 2007, performance in this outcome area was very good and in 2008 it remained so. At 138 (92%), a very large majority of councils and their partners made a good or outstanding contribution to enable children and young people to become positively involved in their communities. No council's contribution was judged inadequate.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- The widespread strategic commitment to encourage and respond to the voice of children and young people commented on in the 2007 APA outcomes report was a strong feature in most councils.
- Increasingly there were efforts to ensure that vulnerable groups of children and young people were consulted and contributed to decision-making. Almost 30% of assessments (49 councils) made particular reference to the effectiveness of securing the involvement of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who are looked after.
- Effective partnership working between agencies was having a positive impact on preventing young people from becoming involved in anti-social and offending behaviour. Over 50% of the assessments judged the work of partnerships to be a key strength, with 65 councils securing a reduction in the number of first-time offenders and 49 councils having success in reducing the rate of reoffending. Overall, there was a reduction in the numbers of first-time offenders and reoffenders.

- The contribution of youth services and youth work continued to be a strength in many council areas. For example, the number and range of positive opportunities for personal and social development and the effectiveness of youth services in engaging young people aged 13 to 19 were highlighted as particular strengths.

Areas for improvement and barriers to success

- The overall participation rate of young offenders in education, employment or training at 71.1% was well below the Youth Justice Board target of 90%. In 23 councils the participation rates of these young people were an important weakness.
- Looked after children remained twice as likely to receive a final warning or conviction as other children and young people. This position has not improved since 2007. The number of looked after children involved with the youth justice system was raised as a particular concern in 29 council areas.
- There is no clear improvement on the 2007 APA finding that in a minority of council areas looked after children were not adequately involved in their own reviews. This position remains, despite an overall increase in participation for the third consecutive year. Similarly, other groups of children and young people, such as children from the Traveller or minority ethnic communities and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities remain less likely to have their voices heard in consultations and decision-making.

Achieving economic well-being

Summary of performance

5. Overall evidence from the 2008 APAs presents a strong picture for this outcome area, although the grade profile is not quite as positive as in 2007. The number of councils judged to be making a good or outstanding contribution was 119 (79%) compared with 121 (81%) in 2007. Moreover, three councils were judged inadequate in this outcome area compared to one in 2007.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Some 56% of councils were judged to have good or improving achievements at Level 2 and/or Level 3. Many APAs made particular reference to good achievement in school sixth forms and sixth-form colleges. Nationally, achievement at Levels 2 and 3 by age 19 has continued to improve from 2007, with Level 2 achievement increasing from 68% to 70% and Level 3 achievement increasing from 44% to 45%.
- In 75 council areas the implementation of the 14 to 19 strategy was judged to be effective. The 14 to 19 strategic partnerships were identified as strong or improving in half of the council areas. In the best councils there was

increased involvement of employers. Development towards the new diplomas was singled out as a strength in 23 areas, and a further 31 assessments identified as a strength an improving range of post-16 opportunities such as vocational qualifications.

- The proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 involved in education, employment or training continued to rise in most areas. The improved tracking of young people, the growth and effectiveness of September Guarantees, together with improving information, advice and guidance systems, had contributed towards this improving picture. Encouragingly, the proportion of 16–18-year-olds whose current activity was not known had also decreased from just under 7% to just under 6% since 2007.
- The proportion of young people completing apprenticeships continued to improve and had risen by 10% since 2007.
- More councils were effective at ensuring that young people leaving care were well supported and involved in education, employment or training. This was a key strength for 59 councils. The best councils were also identified as being particularly good in their support for these young people at a time of transition, particularly through ensuring that Pathway Plans were in place.

Areas for improvement and barriers to success

- There continued to be a disproportionately high number of vulnerable young people who were not in education, employment or training. This was especially so for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Although the overall number had reduced slightly since 2007 there was substantial variation between the best and weakest councils. In 8% of councils, the proportion of young people from minority ethnic groups who were not in education, employment or training was of concern.
- Although the range of post-16 provision across the country is improving, there are areas where improvements in the range of pathways available into post-16 provision are slow in developing. In 24 councils, collaboration between providers was not developing quickly enough to meet the needs of young people, especially in the provision of apprenticeship or work-based learning opportunities. In the weakest areas there was too narrow a range of opportunities, especially at entry level and level 1, including provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- The provision of suitable accommodation for care leavers was a weakness in 13 councils. Furthermore, the proportion of care leavers placed outside the council boundary was not improving and remained static at around 12%. This situation is of concern given the high level of vulnerability of these young people.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services section

Summary of performance

6. Outcomes from the 2008 APA showed that 114 (76%) of councils had good or outstanding capacity to improve. This proportion is less than in 2007. In four councils the capacity to improve, including the management of children's services, was judged to be inadequate (see Annex A).

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- The strengths and features of higher performing councils were very similar to those reported in the 2007 APA outcomes report. Good leadership by council officers, with committed support from elected members, was a major factor in driving improvements. Key aspects of this strength included: high expectations; sharing ambitions; being responsive to changing needs; appropriate prioritisation; a track record of improvement which is sustained over time; and a commitment to meet these priorities at all levels and in all services.
- Good leadership was also evident in the strong partnership arrangements that are built by the best councils. Effective partnership working had improved capacity, sometimes through the committed and imaginative use of the voluntary and community sector, and through the development of integrated working. In turn, the better councils demonstrated better value for money.
- High performing councils had clear systems for analysing needs; they produced priorities and target-based plans based on these needs and allocate resources in a focused way. The most effective councils were flexible and willing to reallocate or redirect resources as needs emerged and changed. Characteristics of these councils were that they were explicit and focused on the needs of the most vulnerable groups, and were uncompromising in their evaluation of their own effectiveness.
- Councils and their partners were often committed to listening to the voice of users; the best acted on what they heard. The best also had well-developed systems for consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on children, their parents and carers; in particular they had sustainable and developing methods for including in these consultations and decision-making processes those children and young people who were identified as the most vulnerable.

Areas for improvement and barriers to success

- Where councils had been judged adequate or inadequate, weaknesses identified included slow progress or inconsistent performance across a range of important issues, especially in the enjoying and achieving and staying

safe outcomes. In their self-assessed grade for capacity to improve, including the management of children's services, 66 councils assessed their capacity to improve more generously than the grade awarded by inspectors. The failure to identify weaknesses in staying safe outcomes was singled out most frequently.

- In 35 assessments, an aspect of the councils' workforce was identified as being of concern; the majority of these relate to the sufficiency of the social care staff. Difficulties with recruitment and retention, and hence an over-reliance on agency staff and a consequent loss of stability, consistency and reliability was a key feature. Further concerns over the quality and qualifications of social care staff, particularly those working in residential settings, were identified.
- Performance management arrangements were an area for improvement in the 2007 APA report and there were similar concerns for 2008. Weaknesses identified in 30 councils included insufficient use of a comprehensive range of data and inadequate use of comparative information and external scrutiny. In these councils, performance management systems are not embedded across all areas of children's services, or are not applied consistently.

Notes

This report is based on the published outcomes of the APA of 150 councils carried out in 2008. Of these, 32 had an APA following the completion of the JAR fieldwork. The information gathered as part of the JAR was used as part of the evidence base for the APA.

In 2007, 137 councils had an APA and the remaining 13 councils had a JAR. For these latter councils the JAR grades were reviewed as part of the APA process before being carried forward for the Audit Commission's annual CPA.

The report has been compiled following analysis of data retrieved from 150 published APA letters together with the national APA dataset for 2007/08. In undertaking the APA a wide range of published evidence, including data and performance indicators, is considered alongside each council's review of its progress.

The following table is inserted to help readers of this report understand words and proportions used in the text:

| Proportion | Description |
|-------------------|--|
| 97–100% | Vast/overwhelming majority or almost all |
| 80–96% | Very large majority, most |
| 65–79% | Large majority |
| 50–64% | Majority |
| 35–49% | Minority |
| 20–34% | Small minority |
| 4–19% | Very small minority, few |
| 0–3% | Almost no/very few |

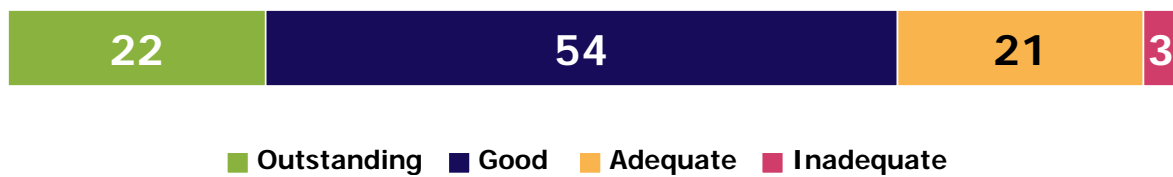
Annex A: Outcomes

Figure 1: The overall effectiveness of the councils' children's services in the 2008 APAs (expressed as percentages)



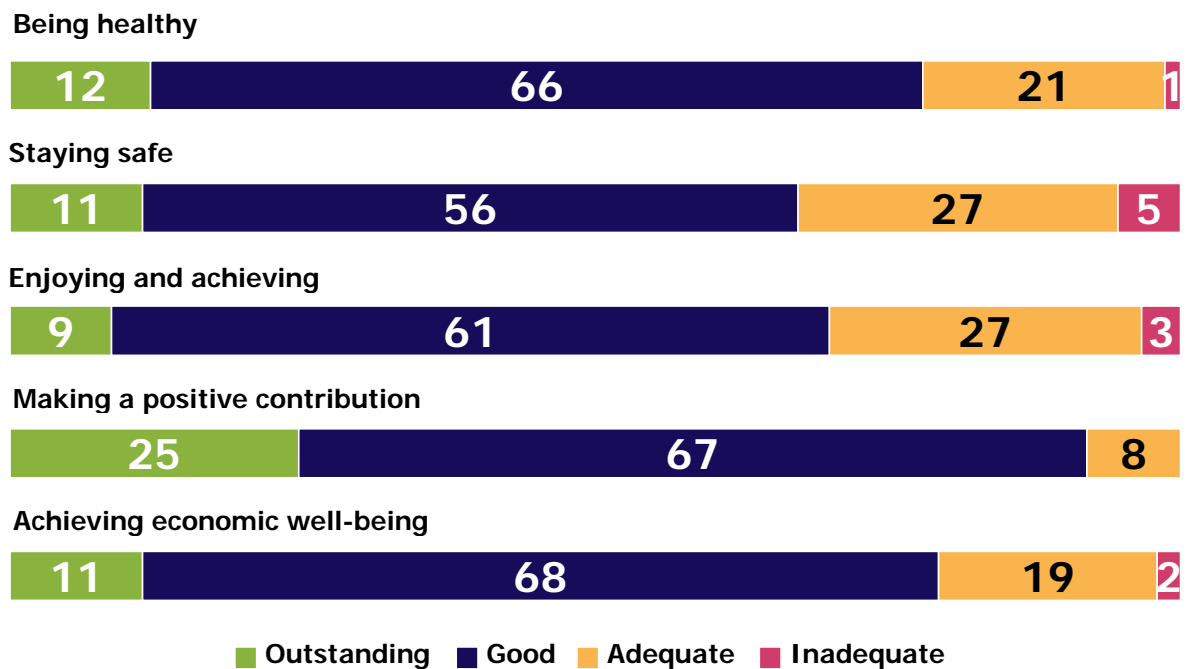
Figures have been rounded up and do not add up to 100
Based on 150 local authorities

Figure 2: The capacity to improve of the councils' children's services from the 2008 APAs (expressed as percentages)



Figures have been rounded and may not add up to 100
Based on 150 local authorities

Figure 3: Overview of the Every Child Matters outcomes in annual performance assessments in 2008 (expressed as a percentage)



Figures have been rounded up and do not always add up to 100
Based on 150 local authorities