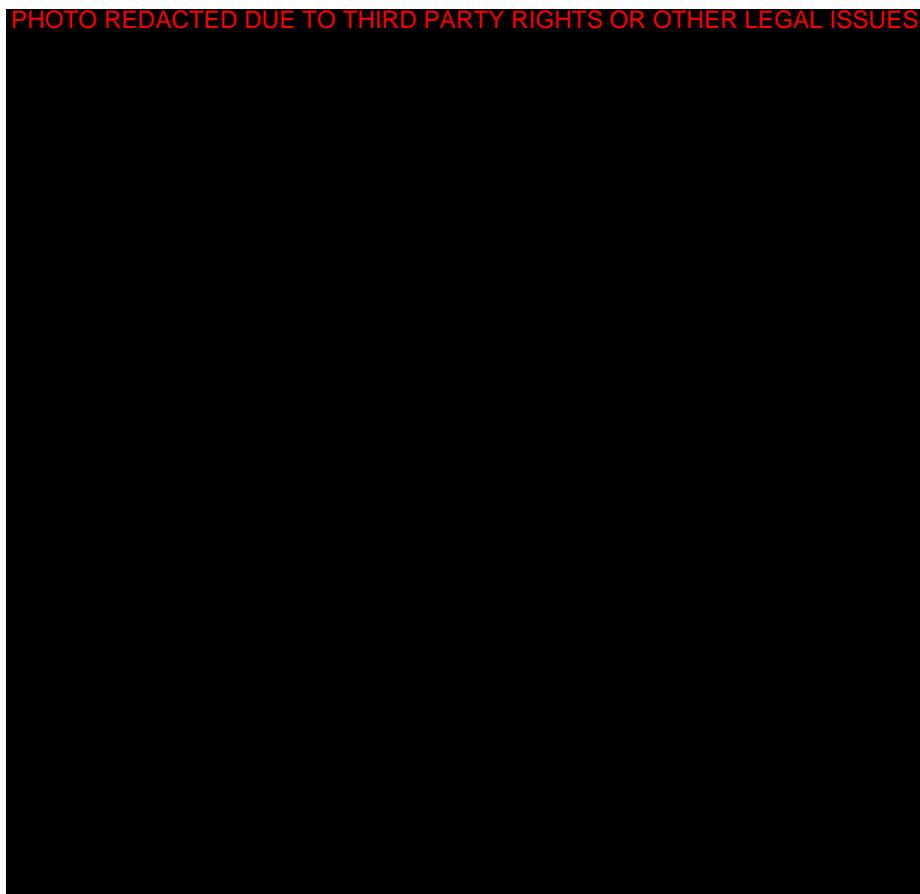


Narrowing the gap: the inspection of children's services

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Executive summary

This report is based on the outcomes for 102 councils receiving annual performance assessments in 2006, and the findings of the first 37 joint area reviews of children's services undertaken during 2005–2006.¹ It provides an overview of key themes emerging as councils and their partners in local areas work to deliver services that improve outcomes for children and young people. It highlights strengths and weaknesses in the contributions made by such partnerships, making particular reference to each of the five Every Child Matters outcome areas, and to their capacity to improve further. It also includes illustrations of practice in a number of local areas.

Joint area reviews and annual performance assessments are two complementary elements of the overall children's services inspection process.

Annual performance assessments are conducted each year and focus on analysing the contribution that a council's own services have made in the previous 12 months towards improving outcomes for children and young people. A wide range of published evidence, including data and indicators, is considered alongside the council's review of its progress; no fieldwork activities are 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. Weaknesses identified in the annual performance assessment are subject to in-depth inspection activity and fieldwork in any subsequent joint area review.

The joint area review judges the contribution the wider area partnership makes towards improving outcomes for children and young people and, through fieldwork, is able to evaluate the way that local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being. In particular, there is an opportunity through joint area reviews to focus on areas of weakness or gaps in provision, on specific groups of children and young people, or on particular neighbourhoods. The methodology for the joint area review enables inspectors to examine more information, analyse in detail the experience of individual children and young people, hear directly from service users and make links between the five outcome areas.

The inspection of children's services has been taking place against a rapidly changing background for local councils and their partners.² At this stage, the picture in local areas, as observed through annual performance assessments and joint area reviews, is therefore one of work in progress towards providing better integrated services and improving outcomes for all children and young people. The overall picture is an improving one, with children's services in 107 out of the 139 authorities covered by this report making a good or excellent contribution towards delivering better outcomes for children and young people.

¹ For further information see page 28.

² For further information see page 32.

Nevertheless, an analysis of key strengths and weaknesses in all outcomes across all partnership areas highlights variation within and between local areas and groups of children and young people.³ There are two particularly dominant themes:

- The biggest challenge continues to be narrowing the gap in opportunities and outcomes between most children and young people and those that are the most vulnerable or underachieving.
- Strong partnerships are of pivotal importance – from strategic level to front-line working – in order to secure the necessary level of support and style of service delivery that will have a positive impact on outcomes for all children and young people, and narrow the gap between high performing and weaker partnerships.

Being healthy

Local councils and their partners make a good contribution to securing positive health outcomes, and none are inadequate in this regard. In the best examples, the growth of joint working, through newly established children and young people's partnerships, is providing a clear strategic focus in tackling health inequalities and targeting the needs of vulnerable groups and communities. The National Healthy Schools Programme is widely adopted, with an increasing number of schools achieving the National Healthy Schools Standard. A common area of weakness, however, is the inequality of provision between different areas and different groups of children and young people. This includes poor ongoing monitoring and assessment of the physical and mental health needs of vulnerable groups – in particular disabled children, looked after children and young offenders, especially as they make the transition to adulthood. In addition, partnership working has yet to demonstrate improvement in key health outcomes, such as reducing obesity levels, although there is some evidence of progress in reducing the number of teenage pregnancies.

Staying safe

The majority of councils and their partners are successful in securing children's safety, although as a result of fieldwork joint area reviews highlight some significant areas for improvement. In the higher performing areas, strong partnership working means that child protection has a high profile, and good analysis of need ensures that the most vulnerable children are safeguarded. However, in weaker authorities, there are delays in completing initial and core assessments, thresholds to access social care services are set too high, and there is a lack of appropriate placements for looked after children. Too frequently these act as barriers to children's safety and well-being.

³ Strengths reported are predominantly those that are consistently displayed by higher performing authorities. However, some authorities, whose overall performance is judged less favourably, also demonstrate some of these strengths alongside weaker areas of performance.

Enjoying and achieving

In the majority of areas, services make a good contribution to ensuring that children enjoy and achieve, but just over one in five areas are only adequate in this regard. High performing partnerships have a clear focus on raising educational standards, provide strong intervention and support for schools causing concern and demonstrate effective strategies to narrow gaps in attainment and achievement for particular groups. Nevertheless, in some areas there is ineffective local authority support for poor performing schools. For some children and young people, poor levels of attendance, unmet behavioural needs and high levels of exclusion are barriers to enjoying and achieving.

Making a positive contribution

The majority of councils and their partners make good contributions to enabling children and young people to make a positive contribution and none is inadequate in this outcome area. High-performing areas are effective in tackling issues raised by young people, such as bullying, and ensure that vulnerable groups have opportunities to influence local policy and service improvements. In the best examples, when children and young people that are known to be the most vulnerable move between schools or services, these transitions are well planned and managed by multi-agency teams; a good range of preventative services provide targeted support in these situations. In weaker performing areas, services for vulnerable groups are frequently poorly coordinated and young people report that they do not have a voice in the key decisions that affect them.

Achieving economic well-being

Overall, a large majority of councils and their partners are good at supporting young people to achieve economic well-being, although some important weaknesses are highlighted through fieldwork in joint area reviews, which focuses on wider partnership working and responsibilities. In good partnerships, strategies regarding 14–19 provision are based on an accurate analysis of need and what is available to meet such needs; there is also excellent communication between a wide range of partners. In these cases, all young people, including those from vulnerable groups, benefit from flexible progression routes and good quality advice, guidance and counselling. However, there are a number of barriers to achieving economic well-being, including insufficient support for young people who are not in education, employment or training, variable quality and range of post-16 provision across the locality and insufficient suitable housing for those requiring it.

Capacity to improve, including service management

Most councils and their partners demonstrate a good or outstanding capacity to further improve services for children and young people; almost half display good service management. In higher-performing areas partnership working is strongly embedded, with sound financial management, good use of resources and data, and a commitment to securing value for money. Areas for improvement include undertaking a more thorough analysis of need that includes the specific requirements

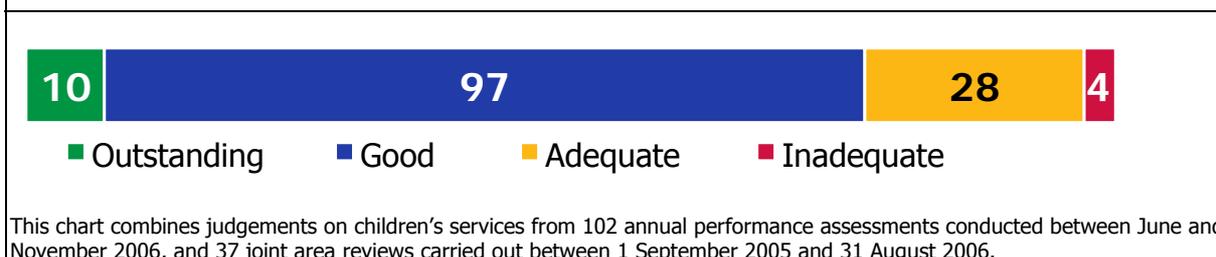
of vulnerable groups, and ensuring that there are effective performance management arrangements across partnerships.

Key findings

Evidence from the second year of annual performance assessment and the findings of the first 37 joint area reviews shows that the majority of children’s services are improving and that partners are working well together to secure better outcomes for children and young people in their areas.

The assessment and review of children’s services have, however, been taking place against a rapidly changing background for local councils and their partners. In some cases, it is too early to see the full impact of children’s services in ensuring that young people in their areas are healthy and safe, are achieving well at school and engaged in activities they enjoy, are encouraged to make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. Thus the positive picture illustrated below is one of work in progress towards providing better integrated services and improved outcomes for all groups of children and young people.

Figure 1. Distribution of grades for 139 local authority children’s services.



The pattern of performance varies between partnerships; strengths in some areas are identified as weaknesses in others and sometimes in equal proportion. For example, there are an equal number of areas in which timeliness of core assessments in relation to staying safe is cited as a weakness as where it is judged to be a strength. Nevertheless, a picture of common strengths and areas for improvement emerges. An analysis of key strengths and weaknesses, and of higher and poorer performing partnerships in relation to each outcome area, highlights two particularly dominant themes:

- The biggest challenge continues to be narrowing the gap in opportunities and outcomes between most children and young people and those that are the most vulnerable in our society. Although higher performing councils and some of those judged to be less so have high quality services, and there is evidence of improvements in outcomes for looked after children and other vulnerable groups, reducing inequalities across all outcomes and for all groups remains a significant challenge for children’s services.
- Strong partnerships are of pivotal importance – from strategic level to front-line working – to secure the level of support and style of service delivery that will improve the achievements of children and young people across all

outcomes. The quality and strength of effective joint working are identified as attributes of high performance in all outcome areas; examples include strong governance provided by local safeguarding children boards, social workers based in schools and multi-agency family support delivered through children's centres.

Two other important and related themes also emerge:

- The importance of councils and their partners having a high level of self-awareness and the ability to undertake accurate self-review, based on good use of data. This enables mapping and analysis of need to be undertaken at a strategic level, and effective multi-disciplinary assessment of need at a service level. This helps to ensure that the correct priorities are identified and that resources are targeted effectively, particularly at the development of preventative services, and reinforces the need for a robust children and young people's plan.
- The planning and management of transition arrangements as young people move to adult services is critically important and has a particularly profound impact on children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, as well as those living outside their local area.

These key findings from inspection inform the recommendations set out in the following section. The themes highlighted above are equally relevant to each of the five outcome areas, as well as to service management, and thus illustrate that work to improve outcomes for all children and young people requires a holistic approach.

Recommendations

The following overarching recommendations are intended to support councils and their partners in pursuing further service improvements. In particular, they will help them to narrow the gaps in outcomes between different groups.

- Councils and their partners should ensure that services are planned and delivered in an integrated way, so that outcome areas are linked and the focus is on ensuring that individual children and young people make progress. Scrutiny of performance, including user feedback, should be used more systematically to enhance and improve provision further.
- Councils and their partners should develop robust systems for evaluating the combined impact of different interventions on all outcome areas, so that the best use can be made of available resources. For instance, what contribution does the National Healthy Schools Programme make to achieving health targets for different vulnerable groups, or to reducing rates of exclusion?
- Partnership arrangements and accountabilities should be strengthened to safeguard and more accurately respond to the needs of particular groups of children and young people, such as those with disabilities.

- Steps should be taken to improve multi-disciplinary identification and assessment of need, including better collection, presentation and sharing of data in order to target resources most effectively.
- In addition to standard measures of development and attainment, the progress that individual young people make in different areas of their lives, including their own accounts of progress, should be captured and used to inform service improvements.
- Councils and their partners should work to secure an appropriate balance between sustaining improvements to universal services while investing in prevention and targeting resources on more acute areas of need. Areas should capitalise further on the development of new services, such as children's centres and extended schools, to secure preventative services that will improve outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people.

Evaluation of outcome areas

Being healthy

Summary of performance

Evidence suggests that the growth of partnership working is providing a clear strategic focus on key priorities, and, in some areas, joint initiatives are beginning to have a positive impact on meeting children and young people's health needs. The contribution of local councils' children's services to promoting the health of children and young people is judged to be good or very good in most areas. Overall performance has improved since 2005 and the proportion graded very good has increased.

It is notable that no partnerships are judged inadequate in this aspect of their work, although improvements are required in many locations. In particular, significant weaknesses emerge in the provision for some of the more vulnerable groups of children and young people, such as children with disabilities and those in need of mental health support. In addition, despite commitment to local and national initiatives, such as the National Healthy Schools Programme, teenage pregnancy rates and obesity levels remain high in too many areas. In the main, this is because many initiatives need more time before their impact can be demonstrated.

Key strengths and features of higher performing partnerships

Annual performance assessments and joint area reviews enable inspectors to examine and report on widely differing aspects of work targeted at improving the overall health of children and young people. This includes measures to ensure that children and young people are physically, mentally, emotionally and sexually healthy, have healthy lifestyles and choose not to take drugs. As a consequence, the overall strengths identified include systems and processes to promote long-term health and preventative work, as well as services and strategies that have more direct impacts.

Higher-performing councils have the following consistent characteristics:

- Shared priorities to improve health outcomes set out in local area agreements and the Children and Young People's Plan; these are informed by robust data and by the views and experiences of young people, parents and carers.
- Effective partnership working between councils, primary care trusts (PCTs) and the voluntary sector to improve health outcomes for diverse groups of children, young people and families. Jointly funded posts and secondments strengthen integrated working.
- Support for the National Healthy Schools Programme and achieving the Healthy Schools Standard. This includes: ensuring that children and young people have access to, and participate in, a wide range of sporting and leisure activities; improving healthy eating through changes to school meals; securing good quality personal, social and health education; and adopting a range of initiatives with partner agencies. This confirms the findings of the previous year's annual performance assessment process, although, as yet, a positive impact on outcomes is not in evidence.
- A clear focus on health inequalities that ensures the needs of communities and vulnerable children and young people, such as those with emotional or learning difficulties, are effectively targeted. In addition, there is timely access for such groups and individuals to a range of services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), speech and language therapy, and physiotherapy.
- Well-developed CAMHS provision, with the necessary investment to provide speedy access to services to meet both acute and non-acute levels of need. Innovative approaches are developing through partnership working, such as telephone helplines and integrated care pathways for primary-age children with behavioural problems.
- A high number of looked after children having health assessments, although the impact this has on outcomes is not always evident.

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[Camden: teenage pregnancy strategy](#)

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

The most frequently cited weaknesses are:

- **inadequate mapping of need and analysis and use of data to target resources effectively**
- **slow and inconsistent progress in tackling areas of weakness and wide differences in provision between areas and between different groups of children and young people, with the more vulnerable too**

frequently faring less well

For example, poor monitoring and assessment of the health needs of vulnerable groups, especially looked after children and young offenders, including screening for substance misuse.

- **weaknesses in access to CAMHS provision and long waiting times for young people with both acute and moderate levels of need, and for particular categories of young people such as unaccompanied asylum-seeker young people and refugees, and those leaving custody or known to youth offending services**

Also evident are capacity issues in relation to meeting mental health needs, and lack of clarity among partner agencies about the remit of the CAMHS and thresholds to access services.

- **a failure to reduce rates of teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, obesity, substance misuse and smoking**
Although strategies and activities are in place, their impact is variable and positive outcomes have not been achieved in some areas.
- **weak management and support for young people, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, and those requiring mental health services, when they transfer from child to adult health services**
- **low immunisation rates.**

This analysis of strengths and areas of weakness highlights the challenges facing partnerships in engaging the wide range of partners across health and children's services in a way that is necessary to make a difference to young people's health outcomes. It is also clear that strong multi-disciplinary partnerships are key to commissioning and providing services that will help to secure improved health outcomes for children and young people, in particular those from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Staying safe

Summary of performance

Overall, inspection evidence presents an improving picture of local areas' work to ensure that all children are safe; however, four councils are inadequate in this aspect. While systems and procedures designed to protect children and young people from harm are generally developing well, in too many authorities there are still some significant areas of practice that require improvement if children's safety and well-being are to be robustly secured.

Joint area reviews provide the opportunity for inspectors to consider additional information, examine front-line practice through the analysis of individual cases, meet professionals from all agencies working with children and their families, and hear directly from service users about their views and experiences. This enables the scrutiny of information and data to be tested in a tangible manner. For example, it is

only through such detailed fieldwork that positive steps to support disabled children, or enable children with learning difficulties to live in safe environments, can be recognised.

Key strengths and features of higher performing partnerships

A closer analysis of councils judged to be good or outstanding in their efforts to safeguard children reveals a consistent cluster of features that contribute to strong services:

- **significant developments in partnership and inter-agency working since 2005**
This reflects the impact of the Change for Children programme, including work undertaken by councils and their partners to establish effective local safeguarding children boards. Such developments provide effective structures to support partnerships in improving their services so that they can have a positive impact on all outcomes for children and young people.
- **strong and effective leadership, including the involvement of elected members that leads to a high profile for children's safeguards, particularly child protection, across the local authority and helps to secure shared ownership among partners**
Some local safeguarding children boards have a broader membership and more active participation of partners than former area child protection committee partnerships.
- **detailed knowledge, understanding and analysis of local need that informs planning and service development**
This ensures that targeted work to protect and promote the welfare of the most vulnerable children and young people leads to routine monitoring and review of thresholds; this helps gaps in provision to be identified early, and more timely, responsive and preventative services for children and families to be devised. Prompt action taken to tackle previously identified areas for improvement, and to identify and address new areas requiring attention, contributes to improved performance.
- **a focus on services to support early intervention and prevention, with an emphasis on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children**
Examples include councils who have: reduced numbers of looked after children through flexible family support; deliberately lowered intervention thresholds to reach more children at risk of neglect; targeted resources through placing social workers in schools; and extended the range of preventative support to children and families.
- **responsiveness to the identified needs of black and minority ethnic communities**
In a few areas, this includes working with community groups to raise awareness of safeguarding, and tackling sensitive issues through partnerships with community agencies and faith groups.

- **robust systems for monitoring and auditing the quality of social care practice**
 This includes routine auditing of case files and case reviews, and use of management systems that ensure consistency of practice and management, such as weekly monitoring of the child protection register.
- **strong safeguarding arrangements for children most at risk**
 In the best cases: thresholds for referral to social care services are understood and supported by all agencies; effective social services' duty, assessment and referral systems are managed within required timescales and to a good standard, with a full contribution from partner agencies; all children on the child protection register and all looked after children have a qualified social worker; and reviews are undertaken on time, with appropriate input from partner agencies.
- **safeguarding arrangements are supported by good quality multi-disciplinary training, which includes carers**
 There is a demonstrable commitment to training from all partner agencies through the local safeguarding children board.
- **the views of children, young people, carers and parents are sought, listened to and acted upon**
 This includes effective consultation, as well as the provision of advocacy services for young people. In particular, concerns raised about bullying in schools have been successfully tackled, and children themselves report feeling safe.
- **progress in implementing the Common Assessment Framework, establishing the role of lead professionals and creating effective information sharing protocols, especially in relation to safeguarding issues**
 These developments are linked to strong partnership arrangements.
- **availability of high quality placement options for looked after children that enable them to develop secure attachments**
 In the best cases, this includes having effective needs analysis and commissioning strategies, developing good support packages for foster carers and adopters, and securing specialist placements where necessary
- **The majority of disabled children having a transition plan that secures a smooth move to adult services**
 Children and their families are consulted on the services they require, and partnerships ensure effective arrangements are put in place. Where necessary, young people and their families are provided with effective respite provision.

Read about

[Bournemouth: allocation of children at risk](#)

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

There are a number of barriers to further improvement, some of which are evident in higher-performing as well as weaker authorities, including:

- **lack of leadership and expertise, and insufficient urgency in addressing weaknesses identified through previous inspection, coupled with an inability to account for weaknesses in performance**
- **partner agencies lacking a clear shared understanding of their roles in relation to safeguarding**
Governance provided through the local safeguarding children board is unsatisfactory and attendance of partners at meetings is poor.
- **thresholds governing access to social care services are set too high, with no shared understanding of their purpose and application**
This can result in a lack of action, and children's safety and well-being are not, therefore, secured at an early enough stage.
- **no effective workforce development strategy, leading to recruitment and retention problems and low levels of training to address skill shortages**
In some cases, difficulties in recruiting qualified social workers result in children being without an allocated social worker, or experiencing frequent changes of social worker, and a reliance on unqualified and temporary staff.
- **weak management information, quality assurance and performance management systems, including case recording and auditing of current cases**
- **delays in investigating child protection concerns and in completing initial and core assessments, with insufficient analysis of risk and limited input from partner agencies**
- **weak action to reduce the numbers of looked after children or to secure affordable and local appropriate placements**
There is an absence of a commissioning strategy and the range and availability of placements, especially within the council's geographic area, is inadequate to meet need. There are concerns about the quality and stability of placements.
- **insufficient range and quality of services for children with a disability to meet needs**
There is little evidence of inter-agency collaboration in this area of work.

While some poorer performing councils have failed to address previously identified weaknesses quickly enough, some have put a range of strategies in place that have

yet to demonstrate an impact. Others lack the capacity and resources, both financial and human, to effect change. They have experienced difficulties in achieving the balance between managing organisational change and sustaining improvements in social care provision or preventative work.

Read about

[Shropshire: intervening early to improve outcomes](#)

Enjoying and achieving

Summary of performance

A number of issues have been identified which, for a number of authorities and partnerships, are key strengths. However, they are also weaknesses in a greater number of local areas. This is particularly the case in relation to the achievement, attainment and attendance at school of particular vulnerable groups, including some boys and pupils from minority ethnic groups, pointing to the inequity between children and young people from different backgrounds and heritages. Gaps are also evident between authorities with regard to the extent to which they are improving the performance of all pupils at different key stages of education.

Key strengths and features of higher performing partnerships

In the partnerships judged to be excellent, an analysis of their contribution to ensure that pupils achieve at school and enjoy their education and leisure reveals a consistent set of strengths and characteristics. These partnerships serve diverse populations, and while all have high standards of achievement and demonstrate improvements, some do not achieve national averages in some outcome areas. However, they are all noted for features that drive improvement, and for strategies that aim to narrow the gaps in attainment and achievement for particular groups. Higher performing councils and their partners:

- **demonstrate confidence in their vision and plans to raise standards and improve outcomes**
They are able to articulate them effectively and can show progress towards achieving their aims.
- **provide strong leadership and have developed strong partnerships with schools, other agencies and often parents**
They know themselves, their schools and their strengths and weaknesses, analysing and using robust data well to target additional support swiftly where it is needed.
- **provide a good start for children through high quality early years provision, and show some early evidence of the impact of Sure Start programmes and the development of integrated children's centres, providing support for vulnerable children and families**

- **provide strong support for schools including school self-evaluation, as well as rigorous and effective targeted intervention to support those causing concern**
- **have an uncompromising focus on standards and achievement from the early years through all the key stages**
They demonstrate added value in achievement, especially between Key Stage 1 and 2, as well as between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.
- **maintain a clear focus on raising standards and on narrowing the gap in outcomes achieved by different groups of children and young people; in particular, they have strong strategies to support the achievement and attainment of looked after children, including those leaving care**
- **implement effective strategies to improve attendance and reduce unauthorised absence**
They have low levels of exclusion, and emphasise inclusion; these are features that also contribute to the effectiveness of strategies to improve outcomes for looked after children and other underachieving groups.
- **recognise the links between 'enjoying' and 'achieving', particularly through the provision of a wide range of universal and targeted out-of-school-hours learning and leisure opportunities**
- **involve parents and carers as key partners in improving outcomes**
- **use their analysis of needs to provide effective support, including tracking the progress of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities**
- **successfully tackle the underachievement of young people from black and minority ethnic groups**
- **have productive and innovative partnerships with other agencies and joint arrangements with other areas that suggest a forward-thinking approach, with good progress in developing integrated children's centres and extended school services**

Read about

[York: linking the five outcomes through out-of-school-hours learning opportunities](#)

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

In direct contrast to the features noted in higher performing authorities, the key areas for improvement focus mainly on the need to improve outcomes for vulnerable groups, and for wider strategies to be developed from which they would be most likely to benefit, such as promoting attendance and reducing exclusion. In particular, the closer analysis of individual children through case tracking and a focus on services beyond those provided by the council point to weaknesses in the provision

for disabled children and/or those with learning difficulties, and to the high numbers of vulnerable pupils educated out of their local area, noted in one in 10 councils. Ineffective support for weaker schools is also a feature.

Nevertheless, areas of weakness identified in some authorities are also identified as areas of strength in some lower performing authorities, suggesting that it is possible, even where overall standards of achievement are below the national average, for vulnerable groups to be well supported.

Key features identified in weaker partnerships included:

- high numbers of schools causing concern and ineffective local authority support for them, including a lack of appropriate challenge to schools judged to be 'coasting'
- ineffective strategies to tackle poor levels of school attendance generally and high levels of unauthorised absence
- inadequate support to tackle poor levels of attendance and rates of attainment of looked after children and other groups, including minority ethnic groups
- high levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusions, and a lack of appropriate provision to re-engage excluded pupils and those out of school
- low attainment of pupils generally, especially at Key Stage 4, followed by attainment at Key Stages 2 and 3, and, to a lesser extent, at Key Stage 1.

These weaker features underline the fundamental importance of effective strategies to promote attendance, engagement and inclusion, tackle behaviour issues and minimise exclusion in order to raise standards for all pupils, including the most vulnerable. While some partnerships judged to be only adequate demonstrate a clear understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, they appear to be less adept than high performing partnerships at accounting for areas of weakness, or using data effectively to target support for vulnerable groups. In some areas, effective leadership or partnerships are only just emerging, and strategies to improve outcomes have yet to demonstrate a positive impact.

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[Stockton-on-Tees: early support for those with complex needs](#)

Making a positive contribution

Summary of performance

Services are making largely good or outstanding contributions to improving this outcome for children and young people. In part, this increase reflects the Every Child

Matters/Change for Children focus on young people's involvement and the consequent growth in local consultation activity. Nevertheless, while there has been an increase in the amount of consultation and number of strategies to promote young people's involvement in decision-making, there is less evidence, as yet, of such strategies being embedded in service delivery or having a direct impact on young people's outcomes. Direct feedback from young people provided through interviews, the 'Tellus' survey – which is part of the joint area review process – the results of the enhanced youth inspection and the inspection of the youth offending team, also contribute evidence to this outcome area and have had an impact on the overall judgements made by inspectors. Other weaknesses, such as ineffective or insufficient action to reduce offending or re-offending by young people, are also evident.

Key strengths and features of high performing authorities

Making a positive contribution encompasses a wide and varied set of performance measures, most of which dovetail with aspects covered in other outcome areas. Some of these measures are about the provision of services and activities for young people, while others are about achieving significant changes in behaviour, for instance, reducing the numbers of convictions. Councils judged to be outstanding in this outcome area display the following strengths:

- **a strong corporate commitment to consulting with and engaging young people, resulting in structures and processes that allow them to contribute routinely to local decision-making and the planning and evaluation of services**
 These include: council-wide participation strategies; youth parliaments; school councils and college student unions; and investment in programmes such as Hear by Right and Investing in Children. The best councils and their partners ensure that hard-to-reach groups and vulnerable children are well represented in this process. This is often linked to a strong commitment by councils to their corporate parenting responsibilities for looked after children and a clear understanding by councillors of what this means for them.
- **following consultation, the diverse views and experiences of children and young people are clearly reflected in the Children and Young People's Plan**
 These views influence the development and direction of existing and future services, such as parenting programmes and provision for young parents and disabled children.
- **a range of specialist posts, such as young people's participation officers, and dedicated resources support a strategic approach to young people's involvement**
 Innovative approaches ensure that vulnerable groups, including disabled children and those with learning difficulties, young carers, Traveller children and young people who are asylum seekers, are provided with opportunities to influence policy and service improvements.

- partners, including schools, place a strong emphasis on building confidence and self-esteem, and are effective in enabling young people to make a positive contribution and in tackling antisocial behaviour and bullying**

Proactive strategies to tackle bullying include investment in mentoring and peer mentoring, and programmes targeted at young people from vulnerable groups, such as looked after children.
- for the most vulnerable young people, transitions between school phases and care placements are well managed and supported**

Newly arrived pupils are welcomed and well supported, and excluded pupils, young mothers and others returning to school are effectively re-integrated.
- effective support, often through specialist teams and through schools, is provided for looked after children and care leavers**

Changes of placement for looked after children are kept to a minimum. When changes are made, they are well planned and managed in cooperation with partner agencies such as schools and health care services. Looked after children are supported to attend and contribute to their reviews.
- a range of preventive services provide targeted support for disaffected and hard-to-reach young people and their families, including intensive parenting support for young people at risk of offending or re-offending**

Youth offending services and partnership working are effective in reducing offending and re-offending rates, in providing good quality and well targeted leisure activities, and engaging young people in education, employment or training.
- there is a high level of take-up of youth service activity, which provides or signposts young people to good quality leisure, volunteering and mentoring opportunities**

For some, this provides a potential route back into education and training.
- there is good partnership working with the voluntary sector and effective commissioning of services from this and the community sector**

Partners share intelligence to target local 'hotspots', and develop strong community links to tackle antisocial behaviour, including racial harassment.
- advocacy and representation services and complaints procedures are accessible and provide good support to children and young people and their families.**

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[St. Helens: elected members working with young people](#)

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

A consistent theme for improvement in this outcome area is to raise the quality of services for young people from vulnerable groups, and improve opportunities for them to make a positive contribution.

Weaknesses most frequently cited are:

- **low expectations at a strategic level of the contribution that young people can make to their schools and communities**
This leads to young people reporting that they do not have a voice in key decisions affecting them at a strategic or local level, and that their contributions have limited impact. Children and young people have significant concerns about feeling safe in the community and about access to affordable transport, leisure and sports facilities.
- **where they exist, participation and consultation initiatives are insufficiently widespread and coordinated across local areas and do not adequately reflect young people's diverse needs and circumstances**
- **disabled young people, including those with sensory impairments and young people with learning difficulties, have too few opportunities to take part in consultation exercises and to contribute their views on service improvements**
- **specialist services for vulnerable children and young people and parents are poorly coordinated and not always available where and when young people may need them**
For example, support for children and young people from vulnerable groups in managing changes in their lives is inadequate. Planning for young people aged 14 and over who are disabled or have learning difficulties is inconsistent and does not support their transition to adult services and further education.
- **actions to reduce offending and re-offending and to manage the re-integration of young people who offend back into the community are not as effective as they could be, reflecting the need for more effective multi-agency working**
- **councils' responsibilities as corporate parents are underdeveloped, and advocacy services for looked after children are not effectively promoted**
Some young people are insufficiently supported to attend their reviews.

Read about

[Norfolk: ensuring all young people's views are heard](#)

Achieving economic well-being

Summary of performance

Outcomes for children and young people in this outcome area are affected by a wide range of services, providers of education and training, and employers and agencies, all of whom have different strategic and funding responsibilities. They are also affected by councils' long-term visions for their communities and their economic development. Arrangements for sustained partnership working are therefore critical to enabling young people to achieve economic well-being. Overall, a large proportion of councils and their partners make a good or better contribution to outcomes in this area.

Read about

[Bracknell Forest: joint working between children's services and housing services](#)

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

Evidence underlines again the critical importance of effective local partnerships in supporting and encouraging young people to achieve economic well-being, whatever their circumstances. Commonly cited strengths include:

- **high priority being given to maximising good quality education and training opportunities for 14–19 year olds, based on a comprehensive and accurate analysis of local need and provision**
Strategies are implemented through well coordinated activity of key partners and kept under review.
- **close partnership working resulting in good use of existing resources, helping to secure additional resources to support innovation**
- **communication between children's services, schools, colleges and other agencies and providers, including the voluntary sector, being effective, and expectations of partners clear**
- **data being shared well between key agencies to reduce numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training**
Coordinated support is effective in reducing numbers of particular target groups such as looked after children and young offenders who are not in education, employment or training.
- **a high percentage of young people, including those looked after, young people who offend and those with disabilities, continuing in education, training or employment beyond 16, with high retention rates**
The proportion of black and minority ethnic students staying on in full-time education is also good and improving.

- **sustainable community regeneration plans contributing to removing barriers to employment for targeted groups**
- **good collaboration between housing departments, childcare providers, Connexions partnerships and other agencies supporting care leavers and other vulnerable groups**
- **looked after children and care leavers being well supported to pursue education and training, particularly through effective links with employers, housing departments and Connexions personal advisers.**
- **young people with learning difficulties and disabilities being well supported in making the transition to adult life and economic independence. Provision is kept under review and developed as new needs emerge.**
- **good use being made of data and information to identify underachieving groups and those most at risk of disaffection, including young people from minority ethnic groups, young mothers, and unaccompanied asylum-seeker young people**
Targeted programmes are successful in increasing participation in education and training.
- **all young people, including those from vulnerable groups, having access to good quality advice, guidance and counselling to support different progression routes**
Effective exchange of information among children's services, schools, colleges, Connexions partnerships and other agencies ensures that young people who need additional support to develop life skills receive it.
- **well-targeted family learning programmes enhancing parents' engagement with the education system and their children's learning and development**
- **flexible curricula and a wide range of work-based learning opportunities which provide accredited learning and training experiences for 14–16 year olds.**

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

Weaknesses commonly cited include:

- **strategic arrangements to achieve an effective 14–19 strategy engaging all necessary partners are underdeveloped and poorly coordinated**
Too few work-based providers and local employers are engaged in efforts to increase access to education and training. In some cases, the council's collaboration with Learning and Skills Councils and Connexions partnerships, in particular, needs to be strengthened.

- **variable quality and breadth of post-16 provision acts as a barrier to improvement and results in uneven access to, and take-up of, opportunities in local areas**
 In some areas the sharpest contrast is between school sixth-form provision and other forms of provision; schools provide limited access to vocational qualifications and life skills courses in some local authorities. As a result, the numbers of young people taking part and succeeding in post-16 education and training, including participation in work-based learning, remain low.
- **insufficient information about young people’s learning needs is transferred between schools and post-16 learning providers**
- **a lack of suitable housing is available for young people not living with their parents, care leavers and those leaving the youth justice system**
 In some areas, lack of available and affordable housing for families also acts as a barrier to them being able to support children and young people in education, employment and training.
- **there is insufficient focus on the needs of disabled young people and those with learning difficulties, in particular in relation to supporting transition to adulthood and adult services**
- **in some areas numbers of young people not in education, employment and training remains high and support for them is variable**
 Some young people are insufficiently aware of post-16 opportunities in the local area, and of the information, advice and guidance on offer through Connexions.

Achieving improvements in this area is a long-term task, requiring sustained commitment to helping all young people and their families to become and stay economically active. As in other outcome areas, this depends on sound strategies being taken forward by partnerships that consist of all the relevant agencies and local partners. An essential element of an effective 14–19 strategy is a comprehensive and flexible curriculum to meet the needs of a diverse range of young people, preparing them for the world of work through a good range of academic, vocational and work-based options.

Capacity to improve including the management of children’s services

Summary

The capacity of a council and its partners to improve services and to deliver on the five outcomes is significantly affected by the quality of service management. Scrutiny of performance in this area is helpful in highlighting the overarching strategies that are supporting integration of children’s services and linkage between the outcome areas, and that are achieving good value for money.

Read about

[Derby: reducing social work vacancies](#)

Key strengths and features of higher performing partnerships

An analysis of strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement in higher-performing and poorer performing authorities reveals a cluster of factors in relation to strategic planning, leadership and management. Many of the strengths and weaknesses have synergy with, or directly mirror, those identified through inspection in each of the outcome areas. The following strengths are consistently cited:

- **ambitions and priorities for children and young people, based on a thorough analysis of local need, are articulated well in the Children and Young People's Plan**
The Plan is clearly focused on outcomes, reflected in the key plans and strategies of partner agencies, such as the community strategy, the PCT delivery plan and the local area agreement.
- **there is evidence of innovation, especially in relation to prioritising preventive services**
- **there are effective strategies to communicate corporate ambitions for young people and ensure that they have a high profile in partners' planning processes**
There are good mechanisms to promote community engagement
- **the roles and responsibilities of partners are clear and understood and partners challenge one another where appropriate**
- **partnership working is strongly embedded within the organisational culture, including children's trust arrangements, leading to inter-agency collaboration and good quality integrated working of front-line staff**
- **strong leadership from senior management and engaged political leadership contribute to securing commitment and enthusiasm across the workforce**
- **plans are outcome-focused, with clear performance indicators**
Targets, timescales, resource allocation and accountabilities are well set out so that progress can be measured
- **there is sound financial planning and management, a commitment to securing value for money, good use of resources, and evidence of better integration achieving efficiency savings**
There is evidence of effective joint commissioning activity that incorporates a best value approach

- **workforce development and planning supports multi-agency working and there is a proactive approach to tackling recruitment and retention issues**
 Good quality training and development programmes are in place. Examples of successful recruitment and retention schemes include trainee and 'golden hello' schemes, collaboration with local colleges and other training institutions, and close supervision and support for new workers with a managed workload. Workers describe themselves as being valued and respected by their employers
- **very good use is made of data to analyse need, evaluate performance, and develop improvement strategies**
 There is a strong framework of performance management, with links between strategic and service planning and individual performance. The scrutiny role of the council is robust and effective; as a result, there is good understanding of where performance needs to improve and efforts are focused on areas for improvement
- **the views of children and young people are sought routinely and extensively, and the results of consultation have a direct impact on service improvements**
- **early progress has been made in implementing the Common Assessment Framework and establishing networks of lead professionals.**

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

Areas identified for improvement in relation to service management and the capacity of councils and their partners to improve children's services reflect many of the features cited above. Inspections suggest a similar cluster of factors that may act as barriers to progress in this area as in other outcome areas. Some are contextual, such as financial pressures faced by PCTs or historical overspending on out-of-area placements. Other barriers to improvement include:

- **inadequate needs analysis to inform service provision and improvements**
 There is poor prioritisation of need and targeting of resources, the needs of diverse community groups are not sufficiently reflected in priorities, and preventative strategies and services need to be strengthened
- **underdeveloped performance management arrangements across the children and young people's partnership**
 Scrutiny of children's services and outcomes by elected members is not sufficiently robust
- **lack of a clear and consistent articulation of ambitions and priorities for children and young people within councils' strategic plans, including the Children and Young People's Plan**

- **lack of arrangements to secure a shared understanding of vision, needs and priorities across partner agencies**
- **poor self-awareness, reflected in self-assessment that fails to identify or acknowledge areas of weakness**
- **service and project plans lack outcome-focused targets, clearly identified lead responsibilities, and relevant resource information**
- **the lack of comprehensive workforce planning, including tackling staff shortages, especially in social care**
- **a lack of high quality and compatible management information systems among partners to inform service development and to enable them to share operational information**
- **insufficient involvement of children and young people, including vulnerable groups, in the planning and evaluation of services that affect them**
- **poor financial management, including reporting outcome data alongside financial data and securing systematic processes for assessing value for money**
Progress in developing joint commissioning arrangements is slow
- **lack of continuity of strategic managers and management capacity act as barriers to improvement and impact on the council's ability to tackle areas of weakness.**

Not surprisingly, the features of strong service management and authorities' capacity to improve that are identified through inspection are relevant to all outcome areas. In particular, they underline the importance of effective partnership working, at all levels, in delivering better integrated children's services, which, in turn, have a positive impact in improving outcomes for all children and young people.

Read about

[Rotherham: involving children and young people in performance management](#)

Notes⁴

The policy context for improving children's services

Every Child Matters: change for children programme and the *National service framework for children, young people and maternity services* provide the overarching framework for integrating and improving local services for children and families. The Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework helps local authorities, PCTs and local partners to identify priorities and measure progress in achieving five key outcomes: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being.

A range of policy themes aimed at improving outcomes and tackling inequalities and social exclusion are set out in a number of government policies: the White Paper on services in the community *Our health, our care, our say*, the Education and Inspections Act 2006, the Children Act 2004 and Childcare Act 2006, and more recently the White Paper on local government, *Strong and prosperous communities*. Common themes relevant to children's services include the importance of: partnerships and joint working, including effective commissioning; identifying local needs and developing an area focus; involvement of service users; prevention and early intervention and meeting the needs of vulnerable groups.

Partnership working

Partnerships and joint working, especially through the development of children's trust arrangements, are key to delivering the vision of Every Child Matters. The Children Act 2004 and the Childcare Act 2006 place duties on local authorities and PCTs to plan and deliver integrated services, such as children's centres, in partnership. Children's services directors and lead members are expected to provide strategic leadership, and the Children and Young People's Plan and local area agreements set out a vision for local areas and secure effective partnerships. The Common Assessment Framework and the role of budget-holding lead professionals provide vehicles for better integrated delivery of services.

Local area focus

Looking to the future, the White Paper on local government seeks to strengthen effective joined-up services through 'a new requirement on key statutory organisations to cooperate with each other in agreeing, and having regard to, relevant targets in the local area agreement'.

⁴ Web addresses for cited publications are in the references at the end of Notes.

Involving service users

A central theme of government policy is involving service users in the planning, design and governance of services. Education, health and social care partners are expected to seek the views and experiences of children and young people, including the most vulnerable, to inform the planning, commissioning and design of local services.

A focus on vulnerable groups

Every Child Matters places particular emphasis on narrowing the gap between those who do well and those who do not. *Reaching out: an action plan on social exclusion* sets out five principles to tackle social exclusion: better identification and earlier intervention; systematically identifying what works; promoting multi-agency working; personalisation, rights and responsibilities; supporting achievement and managing underperformance. *Opportunity for all* reports on progress in tackling poverty and social exclusion, highlighting measures to address child poverty. The Green Paper *Care Matters: transforming the lives of children and young people in care* addresses growing concerns about the poor outcomes for looked after children.

Prevention and early intervention

The Children's National Service Framework and Every Child Matters underline the importance of preventive strategies delivered through both universal and targeted services, and including support for parents. The Social Exclusion Action Plan also reinforces the importance of prevention in reducing the social exclusion and isolation of children and young people, and in tackling antisocial behaviour and offending.

Developments in inspection

The way in which the performance of local services is assessed continues to develop and change. The Healthcare Commission carried out the first annual health check during 2006, and *Our health, our care, our say* anticipates joint performance assessment of health and social care.

In April 2007, a new Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills was created. It includes the work of the former Adult Learning Inspectorate, the children's work of the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), inspection of the Children and Family Court and Advisory Service previously undertaken by HMI Court Administration, and the work of the former Ofsted.

From April 2007, joint area reviews and annual performance assessments will be aligned more closely. Joint area reviews will be modified to focus on: key areas of weakness identified in the annual performance assessment; vulnerable groups, including looked after children and those with learning difficulties or disabilities; and safeguarding. The annual performance assessment will be strengthened to ensure more information is obtained about the experience of children and young people, and about direct service provision, so that identified weaknesses can be more clearly highlighted for further interrogation in the joint area review.

Annual performance assessment

An annual performance assessment of councils' children's services was introduced for the first time in 2005 as part of the integrated children's services inspection framework which arose from the agenda for change highlighted in *Every Child Matters*. Details of the 2005 process can be found in the document *Arrangements for annual performance assessment*.

This assessment replaced:

- the performance assessment of children's social care previously undertaken by CSCI
- the previous basis (the scorecard) for the education rating used in the comprehensive performance assessment.

In 2006, the annual performance assessment assessed each council's contributions to improving outcomes for children and young people. Grades were awarded for:

- the overall contribution of the council's services to outcomes for children and young people
- the council's capacity to improve services for children and young people.

The following four-point scale (LSIF) was used as the basis for judgements:

Grade	Descriptor
Grade 4: A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for children and young people, is innovative and cost-effective and fully contributes to raising expectations and the achievement of wider outcomes for the community.
Grade 3: A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for children and young people, has some innovative practice and is increasingly cost-effective whilst making contributions to wider outcomes for the community.
Grade 2: A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	A service that delivers minimum requirements for children and young people, but is not demonstrably cost-effective nor does it contribute significantly to wider outcomes for the community.
Grade 1: A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for children and young people, is not cost-effective and makes little or no contribution to wider outcomes for the community.

The children's services grade provided the rating for the children and young people's service block of the 2006 comprehensive performance assessment of single-tier and county councils.

Annual performance assessment outcomes, together with the Healthcare Commission's annual assessment of healthcare bodies and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's baseline assessment of strategic police authorities, also contribute to the scoping of subsequent joint area reviews.

An evaluation of the 2006 assessment process has been undertaken and is being used to inform arrangements for 2007, details of which will be published separately.

Joint area reviews

Joint area reviews have a wider scope and evidence base than annual performance assessments. Joint area reviews conducted between September 2005 and March 2007 describe the outcomes achieved by children and young people growing up in the area, and evaluate the way local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being.

These joint area reviews focus on the extent to which children and young people are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. The reviews also evaluate the collective contribution made to outcomes for children and young people by relevant services in the area. They judge the contributions made by a council's services overall and make specific judgements about the quality, management and leadership of the council's principle education and children's social care services, and of other services where there is sufficient evidence. Judgements are based on four descriptors.

Joint area reviews up to March 2007 report on the well-being of **all** children and young people in a local area. They cover universal, preventive and targeted services, but particular attention is given to joint action by local services on behalf of those groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes. Two such groups are covered in detail in every review: children and young people who are looked after by the council; and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Thirteen grades are reported in a joint area review:

- overall contribution of the council's services to outcomes for children and young people (as for the annual performance assessment)
- council's capacity to improve services for children and young people (as for the annual performance assessment)
- contribution of the council's education services to outcomes for children and young people
- contribution of the council's social care services to outcomes for children and young people
- health service for children and young people
- contribution of local services overall to being healthy
- contribution of local services overall to staying safe
- contribution of local services overall to enjoying and achieving
- contribution of local services overall to making a positive contribution

- contribution of local services overall to achieving economic well-being
- service management
- capacity for improvement of services for children and young people in the local area
- capacity for improvement of services for children and young people in the council.

Future developments in inspections

From April 2007 joint area reviews will have a sharper focus on safeguarding arrangements and on specific groups of children and young people that are known to achieve poor outcomes in the local area, or where limited available evidence makes it difficult to determine how well they are doing. These groups will always include looked after children and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

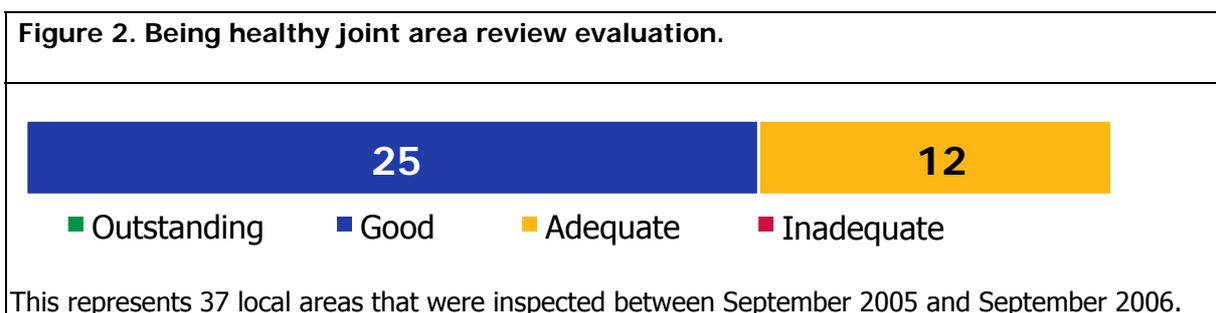
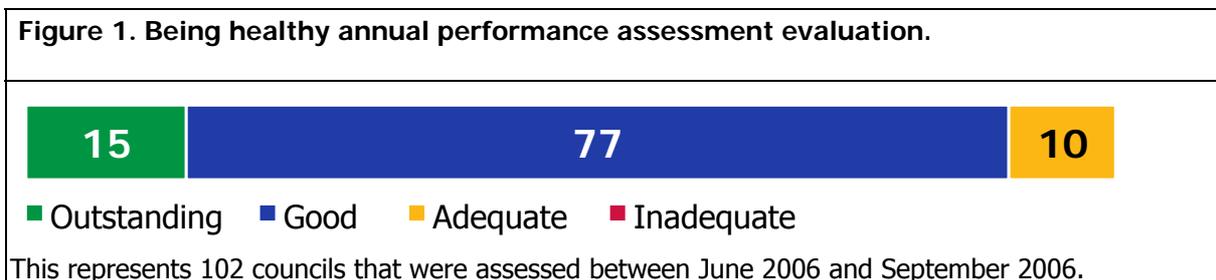
Provision for other groups of children and young people will also be investigated where they were judged to be inadequate in the most recent annual performance assessment or where additional evidence suggests concern. This might include some universal groups such as 14–19 year olds, or a more targeted group such as those requiring mental health services.

Further information

Grades awarded in joint area reviews and annual performance assessments

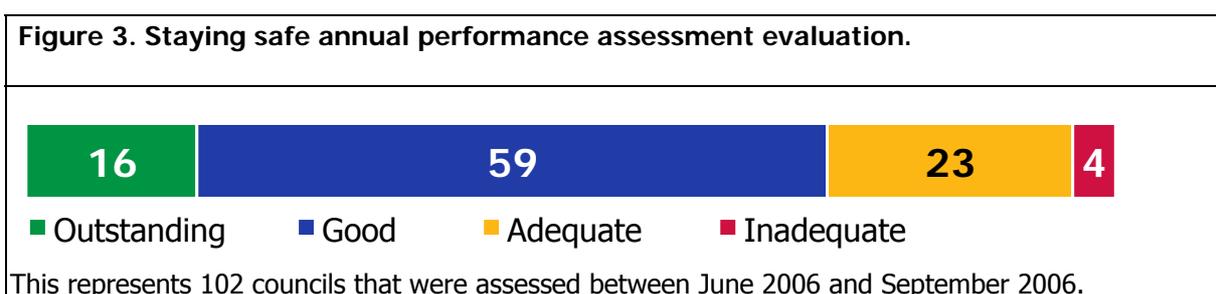
The differences that emerge between joint area review and annual performance assessment outcomes arise mainly from the variation in scope and methodology. In particular, there is an opportunity through joint area reviews to examine more information, track individual cases and hear directly from service users. This focus means that partnership arrangements and the impact of interventions on some outcomes come under closer scrutiny. For example, more references are made in joint area review reports to effective joint working with a range of partners and providers, including schools, and the provision and quality of out-of-school hours learning and leisure opportunities, reflecting in part developments of extended schools and services.

Being healthy



These figures present a general picture, although joint area reviews present a less favourable one than annual performance assessments, highlighting the challenges facing partnerships of engaging the wide range of partners across health and children's services that are needed to make a difference to young people's health outcomes. In the annual performance assessment no partnership's contribution to healthy outcomes to date has been judged to be very good, and none has been deemed inadequate.

Staying safe



Overall, since 2005, there is an improving picture of local areas' work to ensure that all children are safe. There was a noteworthy increase in 2006 in the number of councils judged to be very good. The number of councils found to be inadequate is very small, but has increased; four of 102 councils are failing to deliver minimum requirements to secure children's safety, compared with two of 147 in 2005.

Figure 4. Staying safe joint area review evaluation.



This represents 37 local areas that were inspected between September 2005 and September 2006.

This information presents a less favourable picture, reflecting the focus on the examination of front-line practice that is provided through the joint area review process.

Enjoying and achieving

Figure 5. Enjoying and achieving annual performance assessment evaluation.



This represents 102 councils that were assessed between June 2006 and September 2006.

Figure 6. Enjoying and achieving joint area review evaluation.



This represents 37 local areas that were inspected between September 2005 and September 2006.

Both the joint area review and annual performance assessment processes found performance in this outcome area to be good or outstanding in the majority of cases. However, this generally positive picture hides the poorer performance and particular issues faced by the most vulnerable groups of children and young people described earlier in this report and in some lower performing authorities.

Making a positive contribution

Figure 7. Making a positive contribution annual performance assessment evaluation.



This represents 102 councils that were assessed between June 2006 and September 2006.

Figure 8. Making a positive contribution joint area review evaluation.



This represents 37 local areas that were inspected between September 2005 and September 2006.

The contribution councils make to helping young people to make a positive contribution represents the most improved picture of performance. Over the two years of annual performance assessment, no authority has been judged to be inadequate, and there has been a five-fold increase in authorities judged to be very good.

Achieving economic well-being

Figure 9. Achieving economic well-being annual performance assessment evaluation.



This represents 102 councils that were assessed between June 2006 and September 2006.

Figure 10. Achieving economic well-being joint area reviews evaluation.



This represents 37 local areas that were inspected between September 2005 and September 2006.

Capacity to improve

The joint area review and the annual performance assessment processes both judge a council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people; in the annual performance assessment, this grade incorporates the management of these services. The joint area review reports a separate grade for service management that includes evidence specific to the council's own services. All three sets of evidence have been brought together here for reporting purposes. Although direct comparisons cannot, therefore, be made, there is clear overlap in the strengths and areas of improvement identified through each process.

Figure 11. Capacity to improve annual performance assessment evaluation.



This represents 102 councils that were assessed between June 2006 and September 2006.

Figure 12. Capacity to improve joint area review evaluation.



This represents 37 local areas that were inspected between September 2005 and September 2006.

Figure 13. Service management joint area review evaluation.



This represents 37 local areas that were inspected between September 2005 and September 2006.

In general, authorities' capacity to improve is judged more favourably through the annual performance assessment process. Assessment judgements in this area take account of the authority's own assessment of its managerial capacity, testing this against the direction of travel and current performance. In this way the annual performance assessment can reflect on progress over 12 months and illustrate how effectively the authority has demonstrated its capacity for improvement within a short period of time. Comparisons between annual performance assessment outcomes in 2005 and 2006 present an improving picture. Proportionately fewer councils than in 2005 were judged to be only adequate in 2006; slightly fewer were also judged to be good, but a higher proportion were found to be outstanding in their capacity to improve.

Examples of practice in local areas

Camden: teenage pregnancy strategy

Excellent engagement from senior strategic partners has contributed to a successful strategy. The under-18 conception rate in Camden is now 41.4 per 1,000 population, lower than the London average (58 per 1,000). This represents a 15.9 % reduction since 1988.

The strategy is based on:

- **high quality sex and relationships education (SRE) in schools and other settings**
 - Our 'healthy schools' have an SRE policy and a curriculum, supported by sessions delivered by the sexual health education team in all secondary schools.
 - For non-school settings, we have secured local area agreement funding for a sexual health outreach coordinator to deliver SRE to young people at risk. This is further supported by a dedicated SRE training package for all full-time youth and Connexions staff. Sixteen staff will be given intensive SRE training, and, as SRE champions, will then deliver SRE in youth settings. A C card condom distribution scheme will operate from April 2007.
- **improved capacity and access to support**
 - Contraceptive and sexual health screening services have been improved, with a new dedicated young people's service in King's Cross. Emergency hormonal contraceptives are given free to young women under 18 through pharmacies.
 - A teens and toddlers programme has been developed to raise the educational aspirations of young people at risk of poor educational outcomes.

Bournemouth: no child left unallocated

New cases are always allocated immediately. *This makes it easier to track cases from initial contact to closure or transfer.*

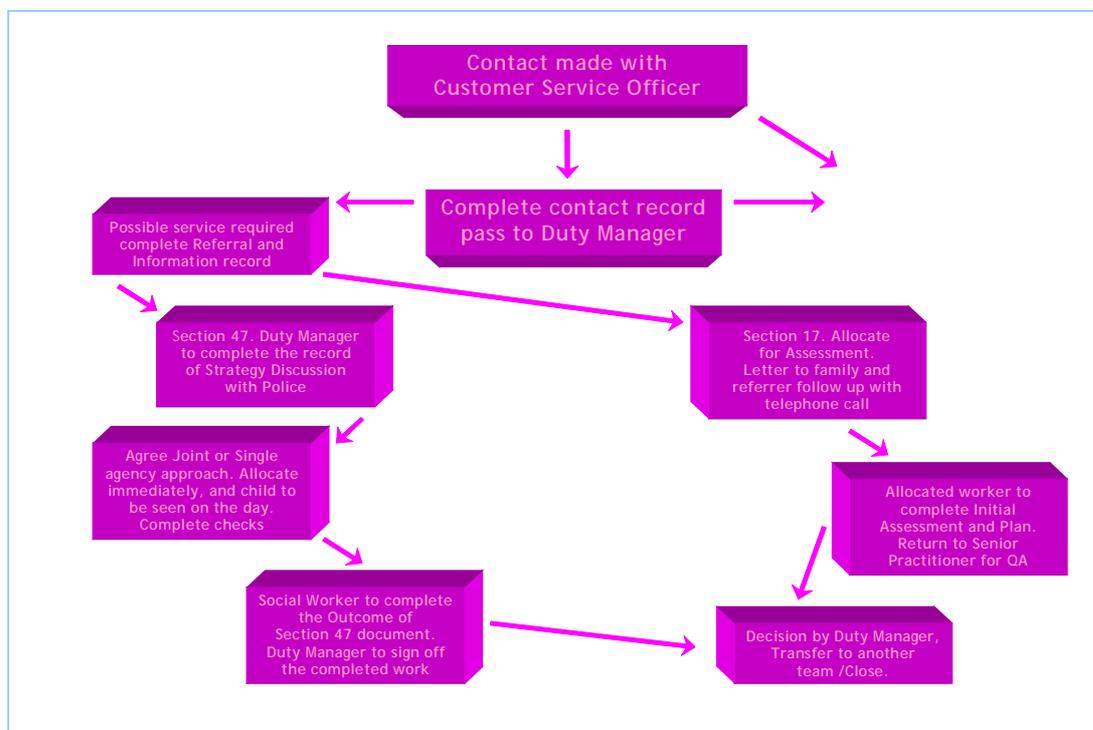
High quality management information, case tracking systems and supervision of staff are in place to ensure that all contacts and referrals are risk assessed on the day that they arrive, and that those that progress to initial assessment are managed within statutory timescales.

When a contact is made, a contact record is created and this is immediately allocated to a customer services officer. The record is then passed to the manager/senior practitioner covering duty on the day. At that point the information is risk assessed using the eligibility criteria, taking account of the age/vulnerability of the child(ren). Information and advice is then offered via the duty social worker, or a referral and information record is created.

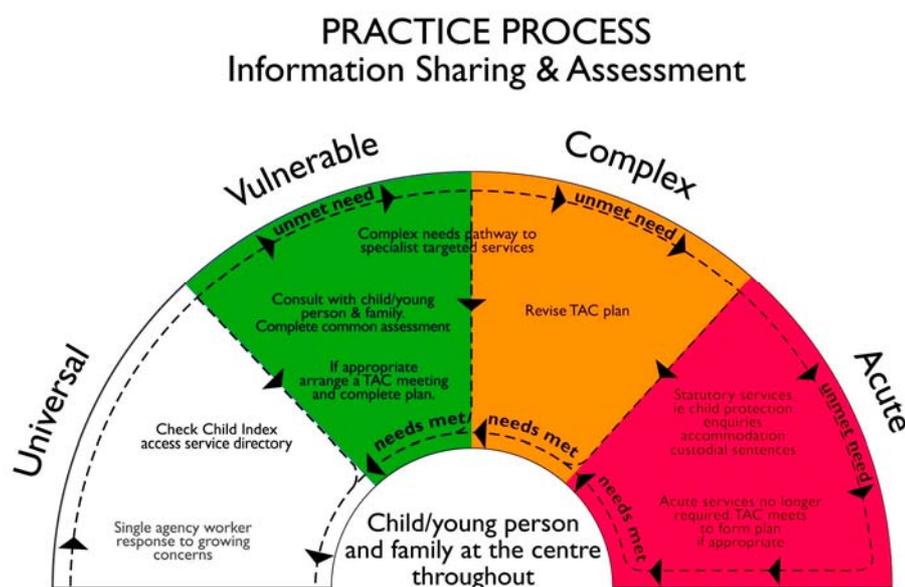
If the referral is under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, there is an immediate strategy discussion and allocation to a qualified and experienced social worker. If the referral is under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 then an appointment is made to see the family within a week and the referrer is advised about the actions taken. This is followed up by a phone call to the family to offer reassurance, answer any questions and obtain consent for basic checks to be made.

All referrals are logged with a date for completion, and the progress of the assessment is checked. Senior practitioners quality assure assessments and are responsible for timescales being adhered to, and for ensuring that children, families and relevant agencies have been involved in the plan.

Once completed, the file is audited initially by the allocated social worker and quality assured by either the manager or one of the senior practitioners. When the assessment is given to the family they are asked to complete a questionnaire about the service provided and the timeliness of it, which is returned to management information to provide feedback on the quality of the work.



Shropshire: intervening early to improve outcomes



The county council and key partners recognised that although universal and specialist services were of a good standard, there were vulnerable children and young people who were not receiving a sufficiently coordinated and timely service. Determined to improve this situation, all key partners agreed a 'continuum of need' – or 'windscreen', as it is commonly known – to direct a joint approach to partnership working and earlier intervention.

Bringing together key partners

The formation of the children's trust brought together all key partners, including voluntary sector representation, and secured a commitment to moving this agenda forward.

Joint commissioning between the county council and PCT ensured that the strategic direction entailed a comprehensive CAMHS and an integrated service for children with disabilities. A strategic and an operational group of managers have directed and overseen the shift to integrated working, ensuring coordination of front-line services and improving outcomes for children and their families.

A well-motivated workforce has been enthusiastic about multi-agency training in common processes and information sharing, and practitioners have been supported well through this cultural change. This has created a common language, increased understanding of each other's roles, and awareness of everyone's accountability for vulnerable children.

What has happened since

The Team Around the Child (TAC) model is becoming the norm, with the young person/family as part of the team, and an early, coordinated response offered to

support young people in achieving positive outcomes. Indications are that young people and their families like this way of working, as illustrated in the case example below.

Activity data has been shared widely with all key partners at both strategic and operational levels. Initially reported on a monthly basis, it indicated which agencies were adopting the common processes, and where further support needed to be directed to progress involvement. Now reported on a quarterly basis, activity data is regularly analysed by operational managers.

A local area agreement is driving the development of a joint performance framework for integrated working, with all key partners agreeing a common set of performance indicators to evidence improved outcomes for children and young people.

Case study

Sian, 15-years-old, had moved to Shropshire with her mother and sibling. She had no clear boundaries, was defiant and aggressive towards her mother and had been self-harming.

Following contact with the school family support worker who completed a Common Assessment Framework and became the lead professional, a TAC meeting was called. The meeting included Sian, her mother, the youth offending service, CAMHS, Sian's school head of house, the local police beat officer, Social Care and Safeguards, Connexions and the education welfare officer.

A review TAC meeting was held a month later, by which time a one-day-per-week college placement for Sian had been secured and a CAMHS appointment had been arranged. During the school summer holiday Sian attended her first CAMHS appointment and her self-harming ceased; she attended only two more appointments with CAMHS as things improved.

In September, Sian embarked on a child development course for four days a week. She remained on the school roll but was educated off-site. A further two TAC meetings were held for Sian, which she attended with her mother demonstrating an improved relationship between them. At this point the TAC meetings ceased as outcomes had been achieved.

York: linking the five outcomes through out-of-school hours learning opportunities

In York, children's services is part of a directorate which includes leisure and culture. This has made it easier to coordinate the play strategy and the out-of-school activity programme with everything else that is happening under the five Every Child Matters outcomes for children and young people.

Schools Out is a holiday programme which includes everything from mask making to scuba diving, and has grown from 15,000 children attending three years ago to over 50,000 in 2006. The senior play development officer is located in the early years and extended schools service, which is rapidly making progress towards the target for every school to be an extended school by 2008. Progress is largely due to the shared foundation partnerships set up six years ago, around every primary school in the city, to ensure that the private, voluntary and independent sectors were full partners in the provision of childcare and nursery education. Since first being established, the partnerships have taken on a life of their own and grown to embrace the full range of out-of-school activity.

To complete the picture, the authority has given a high priority to provision for children and young people who are able, gifted and talented. Green Apples is a partnership with the university which has been run for some years and is designed to raise aspirations for secondary-age pupils in more disadvantaged areas of the city. A programme aimed at primary-age pupils, Little Green Apples, is planned. More recently the authority has been awarded an intensive supervision and surveillance programme grant by the DfES to work in partnership with the independent schools in the city to deliver master classes for up to 800 able and talented, secondary-age pupils. These master classes, all provided as after-school activities, will focus on the application of science skills in five areas: health; society; the humanities; art; and the creative industries.

Stockton-on-Tees: early support for those with complex needs

Early support provision is an inclusive approach to improving outcomes for pre-school children with complex special needs, and to providing support for their families. Its aim is to develop and coordinate high quality family-centred services, based on assessed needs, which promote social inclusion.

The following services participate:

- early support key working
- the portage service
- family groups
- High Flyers Early Support Nursery (an assessment nursery)
- the outreach service
- SCAMP (Support for Children Accessing Mainstream Provision)
- EarlyBird
- training.

Referrals are made to a multi-disciplinary team which agrees a tailored package of support to meet the needs of the child and family.

Agencies work together and with parents to develop services. There is an early support steering group, with two parent members, and an operational managers group to take the work forward according to an agreed action plan. A cross-agency key worker training course has been developed, which has received national recognition. The aim of key working is to create a seamless progression from early support, through coordination of care, to transitional care. Key worker support meetings are held regularly for all professionals involved to share good practice and resolve any issues.

A local information guide has been written by parents and professionals and distributed to families of children with additional needs, as well as to schools and professionals in different agencies. The positive impact on families, reported by parents, includes:

- the benefits of a consistent approach at home and nursery, for example, in using the same communication systems
- joint assessments/visits by professionals as a useful vehicle to share information and ensure that services complement each other rather than duplicate support or leave a gap
- the value of the local information file – it is always handy to have such a comprehensive list of contacts in one place and it is useful when thinking ahead to see there is a range of people in the local area to help with the next steps.

St Helens: elected members working with young people

A number of key features have enabled St Helens to develop effective strategies to support young people in making a positive contribution:

- *the very significant partnership working that exists across all agencies has enabled us to target engagement strategies at different age groups, including very young children*
- *the priority given to this issue by elected members, through work on youth involvement in local democracy, in order to increase engagement in political and democratic decision making*
- *the local authority and partners formally adopting the Hear By Right Standards* during 2005/06*
- *the development of a multi agency strategy for consultation, participation and engagement to ensure these standards are embedded in St Helens's work.*

Consultation with young people

Last year, the voluntary sector was involved in facilitating consultation with young people as part of the development of the Children and Young People's Plan. This year, the outcome of extensive youth debate during local democracy week will be used to contribute to refreshing the Plan.

A key example of the result of this consultation is bullying. This issue has been consistently raised by young people, and this became one of the priorities in the Plan. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel (which includes young people) undertook an extensive study of bullying, including a survey across schools, and has continued to regularly monitor progress in this area.

In 2006, bullying was again raised as a major issue by young people during local democracy week, and their views will contribute to reviewing progress and actions in the 2007 Plan. Work is also underway to identify clear measures for establishing baseline information and monitoring progress.

*Hear by Right is a tried and tested standards framework for organisations across the statutory and voluntary sectors to assess and improve practice and policy on the active involvement of children and young people.

Norfolk: ensuring all young people's views are heard

The main strength of Norfolk's approach in supporting young people to make a positive contribution has been in ensuring that key decision makers hear the views of a wide range of young people. This has been largely achieved through the adoption of Hear By Rights standards. As a result a network of young people's groups has been developed.

Consultation projects are undertaken at a universal and targeted level. For example, in developing the Children and Young People's Plan, a panel of young people translated the draft plan into accessible language for young people and then consultation packs were developed and distributed for use by both primary and secondary schools to ensure a broad response from across the county. A significant number of schools responded with 6,459 individual responses from children and young people.

Feedback from children and young people about their priorities will be incorporated into the refreshed Children and Young People's Plan for 2007/08 and followed up during the year with a 'We asked, you said, we did' survey, to inform our review of the 2007/08 Plan.

Norfolk children's services recently completed a major review of special educational needs, and as part of this review work was undertaken with a group of young people, some with learning difficulties, to develop the consultation exercise in accessible language. The consultation was placed on the Blurb* website and focus groups were run in special schools, and 101 young people took part in the online widget version of the consultation.

A consultation project, 'Are you being served', sought the views of young people leaving care, and led to changes such as the introduction of a phone charge card system for looked after children and care leavers. This enables them to contact their social worker without wasting credit on their mobile phones while waiting to be connected, and/or when they have no funds. In another study, Keeping In Touch, service users said that they wanted social workers to communicate with them by texting to their mobile phones or emailing. This has been taken onboard and is now widespread practice in the leaving care service.

Norfolk's young people's website www.norfolkblurb.co.uk provides a range of information for young people including consultation projects and surveys. The site currently receives 20,000 visits a month.

Bracknell Forest: joint working between children's services and housing services

Joint working between children's services and housing services has helped to develop a preventative approach, reduced use of bed and breakfast accommodation for young people, and increased local knowledge of issues leading to homelessness.

Success has been achieved through a number of different initiatives:

- **establishing a young person's group as a sub-group of the homelessness strategy group, chaired by a senior manager from children's social care and involving both housing officers and social workers**
The aim of the group was to produce a scheme that would enable all homeless and vulnerable young people aged 16–17 to receive a consistent response from services working with them, and to reduce duplication
- **developing a joint assessment form**
Information required by children's social care and housing was incorporated into the form and joint training was held for the duty team and housing, led by the senior managers of both departments. Housing staff were keen to engage in the process, particularly since they had a dedicated seconded social worker to undertake joint assessments
- **setting up a resource panel including team managers from housing, children's and adult services to allocate the available resources: supported accommodation, move-on accommodation and the lodgings scheme**
This initially met on a two-weekly basis, but is now monthly and enables monitoring of the scheme, young people, and any difficulties to be identified and dealt with
- **children's social care is willing to share 50/50 with housing where vulnerable young people require finance for accommodation, where benefits are insufficient and where leaving care budgets are not applicable**
Housing and children's social care share a joint service level agreement with a voluntary sector provider, who assists in the support of young people in accommodation, including care leavers.

The critical factors in effective partnership working have been:

- a shared vision of what is to be achieved
- senior and middle managers working together and providing leadership
- willingness to share resources
- identification of a common group of service users
- acknowledging difficulties and developing solutions
- good communication with staff.

Derby: reducing social work vacancies

Derby has achieved significant reductions in vacancy rates for its social workers over the past five years. The rates for qualified social workers in children's services now stands at 4% and at 5% for fieldwork services. These sharply contrast with 2003–03 when the vacancy rate peaked at 27% for all posts. This success has been achieved by:

- ring-fencing dedicated personnel time to deal with this issue
- establishing a partnership between operations and personnel to ensure shared ownership of the problem
- targeting second and third year students from institutions that Derby has recruited from most often
- including representatives from operations, training and personnel in highly successful recruitment Open Days, with personal invitations sent to targeted groups; use of good quality venues, with good preparation and background work by personnel
- paying due regard to the induction of new staff
- ensuring ongoing post-qualifying training opportunities.

Rotherham: involving children and young people in performance management

Rotherham young people's services (youth service) has developed a peer evaluation process that provides opportunities for young people and staff to get involved in quality-assurance processes.

Each peer evaluation has a focus on either an Every Child Matters/community strategy theme, or on a geographical area. The process is intended to complement more traditional 'top down' quality-assurance procedures by developing a real sense of ownership and understanding of quality issues throughout the service.

The young people's contribution is part of Rotherham's wider voice and influence strategy that is seeking to ensure that young people have a real influence in strategic thinking, service design and delivery, the commissioning and quality assurance of services, and the recruitment and training of staff.

The process

After an evaluation theme is identified, young people and staff are recruited and take part in a short training programme.

They then undertake their evaluation visits in pairs, supported by youth workers, and award their own grades. An assessment session brings young people and workers together to feedback on their observations and grades and to agree overall outcomes.

A peer evaluation report is then written, which is widely distributed throughout the service. Each of the evaluated teams produces an action plan in response to the feedback they have been given. This action plan is monitored through the line management process.

Young people who have previously been involved in peer evaluation act as mentors and provide support for new young people who join the evaluation team.

The impact

The most dramatic impact has been that young people have developed skills and confidence through taking part in the process, and a greater understanding of the areas being evaluated, and now have higher expectations of quality within local provision. Staff expectations have also been raised.

The model is being rolled out across the Children and Young People's Partnership. A peer review of the teenage pregnancy strategy has been completed. Colleagues from the PTC have already undertaken the staff training and will be active members of the next peer evaluation focusing on the Every Child Matters outcome being healthy.

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