



# Annual performance assessment 2006: councils' view of the process



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**Age group**

All

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## Contents

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<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Key findings</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Evaluation and key messages</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Further information</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Annex</b>	<b>8</b>

## Executive summary

1. All local authorities involved in this year's annual performance assessment (APA) process were sent a questionnaire (Annex A) seeking their views on:
  - the arrangements for APA
  - the effectiveness of communications between inspectorates and the council
  - the self-assessment process
  - the quality and levels of engagement with the APA inspectors
  - the impact of APA on local services
  - the time and level of resources that councils expended on the process.
2. Out of 104 local authorities that were assessed, 36 responded. The responses were largely positive. Background information about the process was judged to be clearer than that provided in 2005, as was the guidance on self-assessment. For many of the authorities responding, APA was perceived to be a valuable tool for internal review of progress against the five Every Child Matters outcomes (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being). Repeating a positive theme from last year, councils reported that the process also helped them to promote and raise awareness of these outcomes across a wider stakeholder group, including their partners. The on-site day was viewed by the majority of authorities as providing a good opportunity for discussion and debate between the council and the inspectors, and for obtaining clear feedback on emerging judgements. Views on the quality of inspectors' feedback and the sharing of emerging judgements were mainly positive.
3. The less successful aspects included concern at the lack of time councils were given to prepare for the on-site day. Others commented that Ofsted and Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) staff remain separate while the councils have integrated children's services. Councils felt that better linkage should be developed between the APA and the Children and Young People's Plan. In relation to costs, there was a strong consensus that the APA has yet to reduce the burden on staff time. All councils responding identified time pressures on staff at several levels; they had to devote time to preparing for meetings, completing the self-assessment and validating the data set.
4. Overall, the response from authorities was more positive than in 2005. However, the low response rate to the survey means that comments should be interpreted with caution as they may not be representative of all authorities. Nevertheless, all the issues raised will be considered fully when planning new arrangements for 2007.

## Key findings

### Arrangements and communication

5. Overall, councils considered that the information provided this year was clearer than in 2005. Many found the handbook and grade descriptors useful. There was also a positive response to the queries email box, which was set up to ensure that queries were dealt with efficiently and effectively. Many respondents requested that, in future years, information about the process should be provided earlier. There was a strong message that the arrangements for proportionate APA, which applied to those councils where a joint area review had recently taken place or was soon to be completed, should have been made clearer.

### Self-assessment

6. Several councils commented that the self-assessment guidance was clearer than in 2005. There was a general recognition that the review process undertaken in order to complete it had been helpful in enabling councils to assess their performance against the five Every Child Matters outcomes. A number of councils commented that they had completed the self-assessment with their partner agencies.

### The on-site visit

7. The nature and the content of the on-site visit were changed in 2006 to provide an opportunity for discussion and debate as well as some interim feedback on emerging judgements. This change was initiated as a result of councils' responses in the 2005 evaluation. Responses about the visit, including the discussions held, the feedback given and the sharing of emerging judgments, were largely positive although slightly less so than in 2005. There were some comments that Ofsted and CSCI staff remain separate at a time when most councils have integrated children's services. Several councils expressed concern that the process allowed them too little time to prepare for the visit.

### The impact of the APA process on local services

8. There were strong views that the APA process assisted authorities in promoting the Every Child Matters outcomes and raising their profile. Some respondents felt that it concentrated on judging processes rather than focusing on outcomes. Nevertheless, several commented that it had helped them to assess the impact of partnership working with other agencies, and had helped to drive improvement in coordination. Some felt that it provided a useful focal point for their internal performance management arrangements.

## Costs incurred

9. There was a strong consensus that the APA has yet to reduce the burden on staff time. All councils identified time costs for their staff as they prepared for meetings, completed the self-assessment and validated the data set. Some respondents commented that there was too much duplication between the joint area review and APA processes.

## Recommendations

10. As part of the evaluation, councils were invited to make recommendations for improvement. These recommendations will be used to inform the arrangements for 2007 and the following section details some of the ways in which councils' comments are already being taken into account in the planning that is taking place.

### Arrangements and communication

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrange a pre-APA meeting.</li> <li>• Ensure the APA letter provides a clear overview of the quality of services for children and young people.</li> <li>• Provide a process flow chart to clarify the steps and milestones.</li> <li>• Give more advance notice of issues to be covered in the on-site meeting and a clearer indication as to whether the topics to be covered are regarded as strengths or areas for improvement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focus on the council's children's services will be central in 2007.</li> <li>• Consideration is being given to improving communication systems and ways of presenting information, including the use of diagrams and process maps.</li> <li>• The short notice of issues to be discussed during the on-site visit will be taken into account when reviewing the activities for the 2007 programme.</li> </ul>

## Self-assessment

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve the amount of space provided on the template.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2007, the self-assessment will be replaced by the review of the Children and Young People's Plan. Authorities will be asked to submit their latest plan and the most recent review of progress in place of a separate self-assessment. Supporting information will be provided in the 2007 APA handbook and in Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance for local authorities that will focus on strategies for reviewing progress.</li> </ul>

## Costs

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Better coordination of inspection activity and less duplication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ofsted works closely with other inspectorates, commissions and government departments in seeking to continue to reduce the burden on local authorities. When planning the 2007 APA, significant emphasis will be placed on avoiding duplication.</li> </ul>

## The on-site visit

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish clearer protocols for inspectors on what should be covered in the oral feedback and on communicating provisional judgements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>These issues will be considered in the review of arrangements for 2007. Ways of sharing of information and associated protocols will be discussed with</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer authorities more detailed information about areas for exploration during the on-site day.</li> </ul>	<p>stakeholders, through the children's services inspection reference group, as they are refined.</p>
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### Impact

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a link between the APA and the Children and Young People's Plan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As indicated above, this link will be strengthened significantly in 2007.</li> </ul>

11. Councils were also invited to make additional comments and suggestions:

Suggestions for improvement	Action taken/planned for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconsider the timing of the APA within the calendar year.</li> <li>• Consolidate the developing linkages between the APA, joint area review and Children and Young People's Plan.</li> <li>• Ensure that there is an equal emphasis on each of the Every Child Matters outcomes.</li> <li>• Reconfigure the performance indicators to align them with Every Child Matters outcomes.</li> <li>• Improve the accessibility of the data set.</li> <li>• Improve the moderation process.</li> <li>• Introduce a bi-annual APA for authorities who perform well.</li> <li>• Provide more detailed information about the evidence leading to the judgements reported in the APA letter.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considerable modification of the joint area review and APA processes are underway and some details have already been issued in a letter from HMCI (November 2006). Changes include: conducting the APA in September/October; improving the linkages between the joint area review and the APA; aligning the APA and joint area review with the Children and Young People's Plan review; improving the presentation of the performance indicators; improving moderation procedures; and refining the APA letter to secure better alignment with joint area review reports.</li> </ul>



## Evaluation and key messages

12. All councils involved in this year's APA were sent a questionnaire asking them to rate the process and provide comments and suggestions for improvement. Councils were asked to judge each aspect of the process on the following scale:

- 4 Excellent
- 3 Good
- 2 Adequate
- 1 Inadequate

13. Thirty-six out of a potential 104 councils responded; this represents a slightly lower proportion than last year. Not all of these councils scored every aspect; therefore, the figures do not always add up to 36.

Area of questioning	Grade 1 Inadequate	Grade 2 Adequate	Grade 3 Good	Grade 4 Excellent
Arrangements and communication	0	7	25	4
Self-assessment	0	10	22	4
The on-site visit	2	10	18	6
The impact of the APA on local services	0	7	26	0
Costs incurred	9	20	4	0

14. In all aspects other than cost, many of those councils that responded judged the APA process and outcomes as good or excellent. While it remains for authorities to decide the level of resource they devote to preparing for the APA, a reduction in the resources required of authorities will be a key focus for improvement in 2007. Changes being considered in order to reduce this burden include:

- removing the requirement for a separate self-assessment, using instead the local authority's review of their Children and Young People's Plan; progress has already be made with the DfES to align requirements and guidance
- further shortening the overall timeframe
- undertaking the joint area review and APA at the same time when they are programmed in close proximity to each other
- conducting a light touch assessment for high-performing authorities
- removing the requirement for authorities to complete the social care data set twice by collecting it once only through the established DfES and Department of Health routes.

15. In all aspects graded, other than for the on-site visit, the proportion of authorities giving 'good' or 'excellent' in their judgements has increased. The nature and purpose of the on-site visit will be carefully reviewed for 2007 with particular attention being given to the coherence of approach by inspectors, the notice to authorities of the issues to be discussed, and the clarity of the messages being delivered.

## Further information

An outline of the annual performance process for 2006 can be found in the following documents, available on the Ofsted website:

*Arrangements for the annual performance assessment of children's services 2006* (HMI 2525); [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2525](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2525)

*Every Child Matters: annual performance assessment handbook: procedures for 2006* (HMI 2648); [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2648](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2648)

APA letters for each of the authorities subject to the process in 2006 can be found through the inspection link on the Ofsted website.

In January 2007, councils will be consulted further on the APA process for 2007.

A joint inspectorate report on the outcomes of the 2006 APAs and the joint area reviews completed between September 2005 and November 2006 will be published on the Ofsted website in spring 2007.

## Annex

### The questionnaire sent to councils

The questionnaire was based on that used in 2005 in order to compare views, outcomes and impact of the process. All 104 authorities undertaking an APA were invited to respond and 36 did so. All types of council (London and metropolitan borough, unitary and county councils) were represented in the responses and there was a geographical spread. Most responses came from senior officers in the authority, but it is assumed that the opinions represented the collective view of the council.

### Annual performance assessment of children's services 2006

#### Evaluation questionnaire for councils

Last year was the first year that Ofsted and the CSCI conducted an annual assessment of the performance of children's services, as part of the integrated children's services framework. You helpfully engaged in the review of that process by completing an evaluation; as a result, the 2006 process was modified to incorporate several suggestions from councils.

We are keen to hear your feedback on the 2006 assessment process and compare responses with those from last year. In this way we hope to identify further improvements that might be made as we refine the process

What follows is a brief questionnaire, based on the one you completed in 2005, that invites you to rate and give us your comments on:

- the arrangements for APA and our communication with you
- the self-assessment process
- engagement with the APA team
- the impact of APA on local services
- the time and resources it took the council.

Please use the following scale for your ratings:

4	Excellent
3	Good
2	Adequate
1	Inadequate

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

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

An electronic version of this questionnaire should be returned to Philip Williams [philip.williams@csci.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:philip.williams@csci.gsi.gov.uk) by 29 September 2006.

We aim to produce and send to you a summary of the results of the evaluation, and what actions we propose to take as a result, by the end of November 2006.

<b>Children's services authority</b>	
Person completing the response	
Position	

## 1. The arrangements for APA and our communication with you

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

### Key questions

- Did the guidance and information you received about APA clearly explain what was involved and what you were expected to do?
- Were you able to get queries answered and clarify expectations if necessary?
- Did the process as you experienced it match your expectations from the guidance you received?

### Comments

### What improvements could be made?

## 2. The self-assessment process

	<b>Rating (1–4)</b>
How well did the self-assessment process allow the authority to describe and evaluate its performance?	

### Key questions

- Did you consider the guidance was sufficiently clear to enable you to complete the self-assessment?
- Did you consider you were able to make effective use of the self-assessment to:
  - explain the context in which your council is working
  - focus on outcomes for children and young people in your area
  - identify clearly your council services' strengths and areas for

<p>development in contributing to those outcomes for children and young people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explain the gaps or inconsistencies in the evidence or data that was available to the APA team?</li> </ul> <p>c) How actively did you involve non-council partners (e.g. health and voluntary and community sector) in completing the council's self-assessment?</p>
<b>Comments</b>
<b>What improvements might be made to the self-assessment process?</b>

### 3. The on-site day

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

<p><b>Key questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Did the practical arrangements work smoothly?</li> <li>b) Do you consider you had enough information about the content of the day for you to prepare sufficiently and have the right people available?</li> <li>c) Do you consider that you were able to have a constructive dialogue about your authority's performance?</li> <li>d) Did you have a clear understanding by the end of the day of what the provisional judgements were, why the APA team had reached these judgements and what would happen next?</li> </ul>
<b>Comments</b>
<b>What improvements could be made?</b>

#### 4. The impact of APA on local services

	Rating (1–4)
How effective has the process been in identifying key areas for improving council services' contribution to outcomes for children?	
<b>Key questions</b> <p>a) Do you think the assessment will be helpful to the council and local services in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reviewing and taking forward work to bring about greater coordination of children's services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– within the council</li> <li>– with non-council partners</li> </ul> </li> <li>• improving the quality of services</li> <li>• identifying the impact of local services on outcomes for children and young people?</li> </ul>	
<b>Comments</b>	
<b>What improvements could be made?</b>	

#### 5. Costs to you of the APA process

	Rating (1–4)
How effective do you think the APA was in reducing the burden of inspection overall in terms of your staff's time and council resources needed to complete the process?	
<b>Key questions</b> <p>a) Which types of your staff (e.g. senior managers, performance data managers) in which service areas were involved in producing the self-assessment, completing the data set and preparing for the on-site day?</p> <p>b) Approximately how long did each type of staff spend on the process?</p> <p>c) Were any costs (other than staff-related costs) involved, and if so at what stage(s) in the process?</p>	
<b>Comments</b>	
<b>What improvements could be made?</b>	

## 6. Additional points

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

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

Guidance and our communication with you	
The data set and performance indicators	
Self-assessment	

Thank you.