

Annual performance assessment (APA) 2007

Report on outcomes

This report summarises the outcomes from the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) of local authorities' services for children and young people.

Age group: all

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Executive summary

This report is based on the published outcomes of the annual performance assessments (APA) of 137 councils carried out in 2007. It provides an overview of key themes that have emerged as councils and their partners work to deliver services that improve outcomes for children and young people. The report highlights strengths and weaknesses, making particular reference to each of the five Every Child Matters outcome areas, and to councils' capacity to improve further.

APAs are conducted each year and focus on the contribution that council 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 performance indicators, is considered alongside the council's review of its progress. No fieldwork observation 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 APA may be subject to further inspection activity and fieldwork in any subsequent joint area review.

The report provides an analysis of the grades awarded and points to areas of strength and relative weakness that were reported in the APA letters for each council.

The APA judges:

- the council's children's services overall and the specific contributions made to improve outcomes for children and young people
- the contribution these services make towards improving each of the five Every Child Matters outcome areas¹
- the council's capacity to further improve these services.

Of the 137 councils, 107 (78%) are making a good or outstanding contribution towards delivering better outcomes for children and young people. In 2006 the figure was 86 of the 102 councils (84%). In the 2007 assessments, no councils made an inadequate contribution overall, whereas in 2006 two councils were judged inadequate. However, in 22% of councils the contribution is no better than adequate.

The five Every Child Matters outcome areas present a mixed picture in terms of progress compared to 2006. The grades awarded for making a positive contribution are again the highest of the five outcome areas and those awarded for staying safe

¹ The five outcome areas are: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being.

are not only the lowest but have fallen compared to 2006. There has been a slight fall also in the grades for being healthy. However, there has been a slight increase in the grades for enjoying and achieving and for achieving economic well-being.

Of the grades awarded for the five outcomes for children and young people in 2007:

- 112 councils (81%) were judged good or outstanding for being healthy
- 96 (70%) were good or outstanding for staying safe
- 103 (75%) were good or outstanding for enjoying and achieving
- 126 (92%) were good or outstanding for making a positive contribution
- 115 (83%) were good or outstanding for achieving economic well-being.

Being healthy

Most local councils and their partners continue to make a good contribution to securing positive health outcomes: the proportion judged good or outstanding in 2007 was 81% and in 2006 was 90%. None is inadequate in this regard. In the best examples, partnership working is well developed and more firmly established both at a strategic and an operational level. Emphasis on the health needs of vulnerable groups of children and young people has increased; this is particularly evident for children in care and young offenders. Mental health services are improving and there is more emphasis on prevention through the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Progress on reducing rates of teenage pregnancy is slow. Strategies to address substance misuse, obesity and smoking are not widely effective. There is a growing concern over the oral health of children.

Staying safe

A large majority of councils and their partners contribute well to securing children and young people's safety. However, the proportion of councils judged good or outstanding in 2007 (70%) is smaller than in 2006 (73%). There is evidence of stronger inter-agency work leading to improvements in some aspects of the wider staying safe agenda which includes targeted activities for vulnerable children, child protection and safeguarding systems. For example, road traffic accidents involving children and young people are decreasing. Increasingly, and with some success, greater attention is being paid to some groups of vulnerable children and young people, for example support services for those in care are becoming more evident. However, management systems to monitor performance and the quality of work are not consistent or rigorous enough in too many councils.

Enjoying and achieving

In three quarters of council areas, services make a good contribution to ensuring that children enjoy and achieve, but in the remainder this contribution is only adequate. Pupils' attainment by Key Stage 4 continues to rise slightly and the overall effectiveness of schools, judged by the proportion identified by Ofsted as causing

concern, is improving. There are concerns over attendance rates, especially for children in care, which have decreased on average; at the same time, exclusions from school are still rising. Although children in care are achieving better educational outcomes overall, the rate of improvement is not sufficient.

Making a positive contribution

A very large majority of councils and their partners make a good or outstanding contribution to enable children and young people to become positively involved in their communities. None of the councils is inadequate in this outcome area. Good efforts are being made to involve vulnerable groups who are hard to reach in strategic decision making. Young people's contributions and achievements are celebrated more visibly. The number of young people becoming involved in the youth justice system is reducing in a minority of areas although re-offending rates remain high. There are still council areas where children in care do not participate fully in their review processes. Additional resources are beginning to provide improved support for young carers in some localities but overall this group of children and young people does not receive sufficient support.

Achieving economic well-being

The proportion of councils judged to be good or outstanding in this outcome area is greater than in 2006. More childcare provision, coupled with a commitment to developing family learning arrangements, is increasingly providing good support for younger children and their parents. The achievements of young people aged over 16 are improving, as shown in the completion of apprenticeships and the proportion reaching Level 2 qualifications by the age of 19, but an important concern continues to be the wide variation in outcomes across the country. Despite an overall reduction in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training, the picture across the country is very variable. For some of the most vulnerable groups the numbers not in education, employment or training remain high. Moreover, collaboration in terms of 14 to 19 provision is slow in a few localities and is failing to provide young people with access to the range of learning opportunities to which they are entitled.

Capacity to improve, including service management

Most councils and their partners demonstrate at least a good capacity to improve. No councils were judged inadequate in 2007 (in 2006 there were two) but the proportion judged to be good or outstanding in 2007 (86%) is lower than in 2006 (89%). In higher performing councils senior leaders and managers have developed a culture where every child does matter and there is no room for complacency. Here, partnership working at strategic level has developed into well-integrated arrangements at an operational level. More multi-agency teams are being deployed to work in identified localities with clear targets and a strong sense of teamwork. In a few cases, however, difficulties caused by high staff vacancy rates and reorganisation or restructuring has slowed progress. In a minority of council areas,

performance management systems are not well supported by effective data collection and analysis.

Key findings

Evidence from the third year of APA shows improvements in some aspects of children's services but the overall picture is a mixed one. None of the councils is making an inadequate contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people overall; in 2006 two councils were judged to be inadequate in this respect. In terms of the five individual outcome areas of Every Child Matters, four councils make an inadequate contribution in staying safe and the proportion judged as good or outstanding in 2007 is smaller than in 2006. Despite no councils being judged as inadequate, the proportion of councils judged as good or outstanding in the outcome being healthy is smaller in 2007 than in 2006. The proportions of councils judged as good or outstanding in the remaining outcome areas are greater than in 2006 and none was awarded an inadequate judgement.

Annual performance assessments have taken place against a continuing background of change for councils and their partners. As last year, it is still the case that in some aspects it is too soon to see the full impact on children's services. For example, where there have been important changes in the senior leadership of services, including restructuring, this has led to uncertainty and delays in progress. Similarly, new systems, such as the common assessment framework, are not fully operational, or, if in place, they are not always having a strong impact.

Nevertheless, through an analysis of strengths and areas for development a number of important themes emerge. On the positive side:

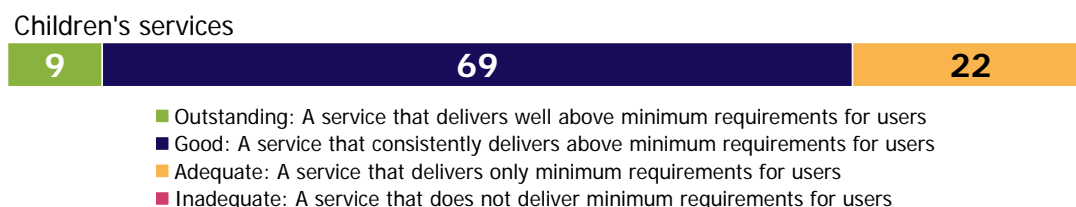
- Strong, stable senior leadership teams are the key to driving improvement. In the highest performing councils elected members and senior managers provide well-informed, visionary and determined leadership. There is a dogged determination to succeed despite the obstacles. Improvement is most visible where data systems, quality assurance and accountability arrangements are working effectively and rigorously.
- Partnership working is becoming more strongly embedded at all levels with joint posts, joint funding, shared priorities, targets, plans and data and a real desire to improve outcomes for children and young people.
- There are shifts of emphasis within the services that councils and their partners are developing. Initiatives often focus on the particular needs of vulnerable young people and the services developed are increasingly specialist in nature to meet their needs. At the same time, there is a greater emphasis in dealing with potential problems at an early stage and seeking to prevent children and young people becoming disadvantaged. In circumstances where new specialist services are targeted at prevention work, the outcomes are particularly encouraging. For example, Connexions personal advisers work on transition arrangements for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; family

support workers are used in schools or health workers are attached to youth offending services.

On the less positive side some councils are finding a number of intractable problems and are having little success in resolving them:

- For example, teenage pregnancy rates are only slowly declining and there is significant variation from one council to another. Councils with high teenage pregnancy rates do not always challenge the quality of their services sufficiently, or fully analyse contributory factors to an increased likelihood of early pregnancy.
- Outcomes for looked after children are consistently not as good as those of their peers and the rates of improvement are slower. There is an increasing emphasis on the health needs of children in care, but in education the gap in attainment between pupils overall and that of children in care is of great concern. In over half of the councils attendance rates of children in care have declined since 2006. Although the numbers involved are small, the re-offending rates of children in care are high.
- Overall, preventative strategies are not yet having any significant impact on some aspects of the staying safe agenda. The numbers referred to social care services and the rates of referral and the numbers placed on child protection registers have not changed substantially, or are increasing.
- Despite increased resources to assess local substance misuse needs, including alcohol and smoking, and to ensure that more specialist treatment programmes are available, there is still insufficient focus on preventative strategies. Councils are utilising the range of resources available to them more, but some agencies do not fully understand their role in working alongside other professionals in preventing problems from occurring in the first place. The full impact of education programmes has yet to be realised. Ten councils were identified as having insufficient capacity to adequately support drug treatment programmes and young people with mental health needs were particularly poorly supported.
- Workforce issues remain a problem in some council areas with difficulties in recruiting managers and operational staff in both education and social care.

Figure 1. The overall effectiveness of the council's children's services in annual performance assessments (percentage of local authorities*)



*based on 137 local authorities.

Recommendations

The following overarching recommendations are intended to support councils and their partners in pursuing service improvement:

- Councils should work with their partners to consolidate and improve the new structures and systems they have put in place and ensure that quality assurance measures focus on the impact of local provision and better outcomes for children and young people.
- Councils and their partners should tackle seemingly intractable problems by:
 - taking an holistic approach which ensures that all involved from strategic to operational level understand the complexity and diversity of local issues and are fully aware of their role in resolving them
 - providing high quality, well-focused preventative programmes that are delivered by a range of professionals and improve outcomes
 - by drawing on good practice in similar councils.
- A more rigorous and challenging approach should be taken to ensure looked after children are afforded the same opportunities to make progress and excel as their peers, and that their attendance and attainment improves.
- Management systems to monitor performance should be improved in order to ensure the quality of work of those involved in safeguarding children and young people.
- Comprehensive workforce development strategies should be implemented in some local areas to address the difficulties caused by high staff turnover and long-term vacancies in both education and social care.

Evaluation of outcome areas

Being healthy

Summary of performance

Overall, performance in this outcome area is lower than it was in 2006. With 112 of the 137 councils subject to APA in 2007, the contribution of local councils' children's services to promoting the health of children and young people was judged good or outstanding in most council areas. In 2006 the proportion judged good or outstanding was greater at 90%. As in the previous year no councils were judged inadequate in this outcome area. However, the contribution of more than twice as many councils (25 in all), together with their partners, was judged to be only adequate for this aspect of their work.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Collaboration between health services and other children's services is improving with closer integrated working at operational level. There is more evidence of shared priorities which led to jointly funded posts and commissioning processes. Projects are more innovative and there is a stronger emphasis on inclusion. For example, where partnerships sense that performance is at a plateau, approaches have been reviewed and services targeted more specifically at key groups of children and families. Consultation is given a high priority: the user comes first.
- Increasingly initiatives focus on particular groups. For example, for children in care, clear benefits are emerging from specialist multi-agency teams and specialist posts. Initiatives such as free access to leisure facilities for children in care are becoming more prevalent and higher numbers of health assessments and dental checks have been sustained in over three quarters of council areas. Services to support children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are increasing in variety and range.
- Strategies to integrate Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are resulting in stronger working partnerships and shorter waiting times. The performance nationally in meeting both the four and 26 week targets has improved. In many cases improvement has stemmed from significant investment. More robust prioritisation is evident, with services increasingly targeted at specific groups of vulnerable children and young people.
- There is greater coordinated emphasis on the promotion of healthy lifestyles. These strategies are targeted at parents, when they come into contact with health services and at children and young people when in school. The take-up of the Healthy Schools programme is very good across the country.
- Timely access to drug treatment programmes for young people within the criminal justice system has improved. The assessment and delivery of intervention programmes have improved.

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

- Teenage pregnancy rates are declining nationally but the rate is slow; it does not meet government targets and the picture across the country shows wide variations. In a few areas there are concerns over funding for initiatives. In others, strategies which have proved ineffective require review and evaluation. Sexual awareness and education are identified for improvement in a few localities where there are instances of increased rates of sexually transmitted diseases, including chlamydia, among teenagers.
- Obesity, smoking and alcohol misuse all continue to be aspects of the health of children and young people to cause considerable concern. Despite the

very good take-up of the Healthy Schools programme and the fact that strategies are often in place, or are being developed to address these issues, there is little evidence of impact.

- Substance misuse features as an area for improvement in a small minority of council areas. A greater capacity is required to assess local needs and intervene appropriately, whether through more preventative work or treatment programmes. The need to improve the capacity of drug treatment programmes was referred to in 10 APA letters.
- Weaknesses remain in CAMHS provision and in a few council areas the strategies to ensure equality of access to mental health services are inadequate. Concerns continue regarding out-of-hours and weekend provision, inadequate specialist services and CAMHS provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Oral health in children and young people is a growing concern in a minority of councils. Data from previous years concerning oral health in children at ages five, 12 and 14 has indicated deterioration in oral health.
- In a very small minority of council areas (11%) key health-related aspects of corporate parenting are still being neglected. Assessment in 2007 indicates that dental and health checks for children in care are not provided adequately by at least 15 councils.
- Although there has been an overall improvement in the number of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who had transition plans in place at 14 years or above, 20 councils did not meet the target of 75% of young people having such transition plans.

Staying safe

Summary of performance

Overall, inspection evidence from the 2007 APA presents a slightly less positive picture of councils' contribution to all aspects of the staying safe agenda. The proportion judged outstanding in 2007 (9%) is smaller than in 2006 (16%), and the overall proportion judged to be good or better in 2007 (70%) is smaller than in 2006 (73%). Four councils are inadequate in this aspect, the same number as in 2006, although three of these are different councils from the previous year. There is evidence of strong inter-agency work leading to some improvements, but in too many council areas management systems to monitor performance and the quality of work lack consistency and rigour.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Strong inter-agency work with a clear focus on preventative work and early intervention is leading to improvements in keeping children safe. Services are increasingly targeted, flexible and quick to respond to need. In the very best examples there is a culture of providing support to families. A majority

of councils improved their performance in the level of completed initial and core assessments for children and young people in need.

- In the best cases, the Local Safeguarding Children Board is often the key driver for improvement. Performance is improved through strong performance management, underpinned by effective use of data and information sharing. Patterns, trends and front line practice are monitored regularly which leads to swift and effective management intervention.
- There has been a noticeable decline in the number of road traffic accidents affecting children and young people, with effective multi-agency work often taking place in partnership with schools making a significant impact.
- Increasingly, the better councils are devoting additional resources to vulnerable children and young people. Where strategies such as anti-bullying partnership work in schools, focused work with minority ethnic communities, and increased support for families in which children suffer the effects of domestic violence exist, they provide important support and improve outcomes.
- Strong corporate parenting leads to effective support for children and young people in care. Particularly strong features of the best councils include:
 - the creation and deployment of specialist teams or workers
 - the prompt and timely completion of statutory processes
 - high proportions of children in care having their views taken into account at reviews, often through effective advocacy services
 - thorough transition plans and support for care leavers going on to some form of independent living
 - an increase in the provision of suitable accommodation
 - involvement of senior officers and cabinet members in the corporate parenting mix.
- The number of children with a child protection plan who need to be re-registered is declining, indicating that the initial social care support that has been provided is increasingly effective in ensuring that continuing support is not required.
- When children are taken into care changes in placements are kept to a minimum, at least in the short term. More than 90% of councils provide stable places and that percentage is improving.

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

- Strategies aimed at supporting families which are experiencing difficulties are not having the necessary impact on improving staying safe outcomes. The number of referrals of young people under the age of 18 to social care services has changed very little in the past year. The rate of referral is highlighted as a cause for concern in 34 of the council areas. Only a small

drop in the number of children entering care has been achieved and the number being placed on child protection registers is actually increasing, albeit very slightly. In half of the councils there have been improvements, but there are continuing concerns for the remainder, showing that across the country there is a very variable picture.

- Quality assurance and monitoring processes are weak in a minority of councils. Managers do not give sufficient time or attention to checking case files of children in need and establishing consistency and accuracy in key processes.
- Too many initial and core assessments of a child's needs do not regularly take place within an acceptable timescale. Although the proportion of these assessments completed on time is improving, the rate of improvement is slow. This was identified as an important weakness in at least a quarter of all councils. Similar concerns exist regarding the timeliness of child protection conferences.
- In a small minority of councils, staff from the various agencies who may become involved at different stages of social care referrals do not always know or understand the criteria that exist for triggering different levels of services.
- Concerns remain regarding the recruitment and retention of social workers and their qualifications. In a few council areas not all children in care are allocated a qualified social worker.
- Longer term placement arrangements for children who are taken into care are still a major cause for concern and well below the current national public service agreement target. Often children cannot choose their placement and the general quality of the placements themselves is poor. The number of adoptions is low in too many cases.
- The timeliness of reviews for children in care is often poor. The national trend for reviews being conducted within the required timeframes has improved during the past two years, but in 29 councils performance is judged as poor and only a third of all councils achieve the required standard.
- Only one third of councils have pathway plans in place for when young people aged 16 years and above leave care. In some cases the accommodation provided for these young people and the support they receive through personal advisers is inadequate.
- Unless provision is good in all aspects and at all levels for children in care, progress is not secure.
- Although there have been improvements in recent years, it remains the case that in a few council areas the systems are inadequate for monitoring the whereabouts of children and young people, tracking those who are missing and for sharing this information in a coordinated fashion between services.

Enjoying and achieving

Summary of performance

There has been a slight improvement in the past year in this outcome area. Although a quarter of councils make only an adequate contribution to ensuring that children enjoy and achieve, for the first time no council has been judged inadequate in this respect. Moreover, 103 (75%) of the 137 councils subject to an APA received a good or outstanding judgement, in 2006 the proportion was 73%.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Pupils' achievement and the standards reached are improving, but they still vary a great deal. For example, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A*–C grades at GCSE continues to rise, and over half of the APA letters refer specifically to this. The proportion of pupils leaving school with at least one GCSE qualification also rose, with the proportion now leaving school without any GCSE qualification or its equivalent down to 1.1% nationally. However, in 40 council assessments the rate of improvement in these indicators was highlighted as a concern.
- Within the overall improving attainment picture, important improvements are being made by some of the most vulnerable groups of pupils. Initiatives designed to close the gap between the achievements of most children and those of particularly vulnerable groups are having the biggest impact in the highest performing areas. These successful councils are targeting their resources carefully and evaluating the rate of improvement regularly to ensure there is no loss of impetus. Specific projects aimed at minority ethnic groups, young carers and recently arrived refugee and asylum seekers have ensured that close attention is given to monitoring and supporting the pupils' progress.
- The overall quality of school effectiveness is improving. A smaller proportion of schools was placed in a category of concern following inspections in 2006–07 (6%) compared with the previous year (8%). Services provided by councils are targeted more closely and provide more robust challenge and support. The most effective services operate within a clear framework that is the product of consultation and agreement by all stakeholders, and which identifies and supports schools at risk at an early stage. Those schools that do fall into an Ofsted category of concern are supported well with clear and realistic action plans for improvement.

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

- The achievements of very young children, as measured in the Early Years Foundation Profile, drew twice as many expressions of concern in the APA as recognition of improvements. The data used to measure achievement and track progress for children of this age are relatively new, being in their

second year of use; nevertheless, improvement is poor in many council areas. Concerns of this kind are more likely to be found in local areas where there is significant socio-economic disadvantage, suggesting that councils who have the biggest challenge in preparing very young children for their school education are struggling to meet that challenge.

- School attendance rates fell with absence rising in primary and secondary schools compared with the previous year. At times councils do not use the full range of additional resources available to them from local partner agencies. A further difficulty is the generally low school attendance of children in care. This was a problem in over half of the councils. The proportion of looked after children missing five or more weeks schooling has risen by 0.7% since 2006.
- Despite some continuing improvements in the educational attainment levels of children in care, a huge gap remains between their achievements and those of children in general. The proportion being entered for GCSE examinations in Year 11 continues to rise (up almost 9% to 66% in three years) and the proportion leaving school without any GCSE qualifications is declining (down 6.5% to 4.5% in three years). This rate of improvement is too slow. The proportion of those who leave care with at least five A*–C GCSE passes has risen from a very low base by only 2.6% over the past three years. Too many councils still do not give sufficient attention to this particular group of children and young people.
- Overall, efforts to reduce exclusions of pupils from school have stalled. Although there has been a slight decline in permanent exclusions from primary schools, the rate of permanent exclusions at secondary level remains constant. Rates of fixed-term exclusions are increasing in both phases. Furthermore, there are too many councils where the educational provision for those children who are excluded fails to meet statutory requirements or where the quality of alternative provision is unsatisfactory.
- In a few councils, the management of learning difficulties and/or disabilities is unsatisfactory. Although there has been an overall improvement in the number of young people aged 14 or above with learning difficulties and/or disabilities having transition plans in place, 20 councils did not meet the target of 75%. In addition, the academic progress made by these young people and the inadequate arrangements made for monitoring and reporting on it were too often raised as points of concern.

Making a positive contribution

Summary of performance

Performance for this outcome area remains very good. In 2007 and 2006 a very high percentage of councils were judged to be good or outstanding for this outcome (92% in 2007 and 93% in 2006). No council was judged inadequate.

Key strengths and features of high performing councils

- Among partners and in particular the best councils, there is a strategic commitment to encourage and respond to the voice of children and young people. Elected members have frequent meaningful contact with groups of young people and there are 'Champions' to promote and ensure their influence; a range of structures and forums exist to enable their continuing influence on decision-making and services.
- In the best examples, the structures and processes set up to facilitate participation pay particular attention to providing opportunities for children and young people from the more vulnerable or disadvantaged groups to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This includes targeted initiatives for children in care, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and socially disadvantaged groups such as excluded pupils or refugees and asylum seekers. Resources allocated to set up and sustain these initiatives are effective.
- In most of these local areas the youth service is playing a prominent role in promoting the voice of young people and providing opportunities for positive activity, and engages a higher proportion than average of the population of young people. Opportunities for children and young people to influence the strategic direction of services available to them are increasing.
- Outcomes are often excellent in places where the Youth Offending Service is working in close collaboration with partners and, partly in consequence of this collaboration, is effective in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. Nationally almost half of councils were found to have reduced the number of first-time offenders. Initiatives by the police, the Youth Offending Service and other partners such as schools are engaging with and responding to young people most at risk in targeted areas.
- There is a growing culture of promoting and celebrating the achievement of children and young people. Innovative programmes promote and develop young people's understanding as young citizens, and provide opportunities for service to the community and voluntary activities.

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

- In the weaker council areas, although there is usually some consultation with children and young people, it is not systematic or comprehensive and does not influence or help to shape services to any meaningful extent. Even when their views are sought they are given little feedback and there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate the extent to which the council has listened to and used the information. Occasionally, councils believe they are consulting well with children and young people because they discuss issues with, for example the youth council or parliament in the area; these councils' arrangements do not sufficiently take account of the views of children and young people as a whole.

- In a small minority of areas efforts to reduce the levels of re-offending are not succeeding. Re-offending rates nationally show that half of all first-time offenders go on to re-offend within two years. In particular there are concerns over the number of children in care aged 10 and over who are involved with the youth justice system and go on to re-offend.
- The percentage of children in care who participate in their own reviews has risen from 79% in 2005–06 to 87% in 2006–07, but in 17 council areas, inspectors identified the participation of these young people in their own review processes as an area for development. In a very small minority of cases, advocacy arrangements to support their engagement are inadequate or pathway plans are not in place.
- Although it is clear that councils are increasingly aware of the needs of young carers, the provision to support them is often limited. More needs to be done to identify those children and young people faced with these challenges and to coordinate support and services for them.

Achieving economic well-being

Summary of performance

Annual performance assessment findings show a more positive picture in 2007 for this outcome area. Overall, 84% of councils make a good or better contribution to outcomes. The proportion in 2006 was 80%. There were no inadequate judgements in 2006 or 2007.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- There are continuing improvements in the proportion of young people who complete apprenticeships. This improvement is found in over half of the councils; in over two thirds the improvement is substantial. Although in some sector skill areas success rates are still below 50%, the overall improvement in the proportion of young people who complete apprenticeships across the country in recent years is impressive.
- The number of childcare places available has increased substantially. Councils are clearly aware of how the provision of such support can have a great impact on the economic well-being of children and their families. More than 80 councils increased the overall number of childcare places available. Improvements in the quantity of childcare places often correlated with an increasing emphasis on family learning and support.
- In the best councils there is a marked improvement in the quantity and quality of vocational provision for 14–19-year-olds. This might take the form of straightforward increases in the number of vocational courses available at Level 1 and Level 2 or better planned progression routes for young people from the age of 14. In the best councils strategies for 14 to 19 education and training provision have been revised and are helping all young people but particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those

living in less advantaged areas. These strategies are often aided by good quality data that are shared regularly among partners.

- The better councils are increasingly effective at ensuring that young people leaving care are engaged in education, employment or training. However, the relatively low educational attainment of many care leavers is still having a negative effect on their life chances.
- In the best council areas the provision of suitable accommodation for young people is improving. In some cases effective links between councils' children's services and housing departments are facilitating this provision.

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

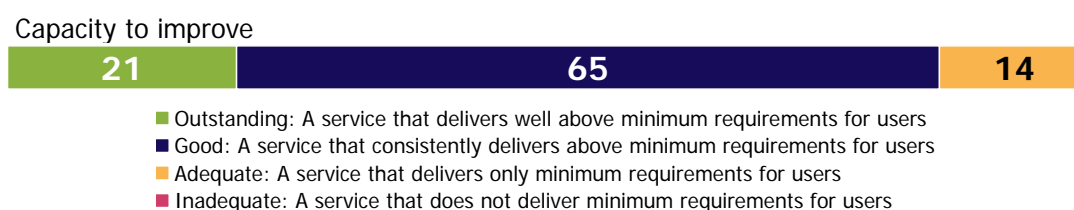
- The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training varies significantly across the country, with 59 council areas able to demonstrate improvement, almost equally matched by 49 areas where the performance has declined. Moreover, there are considerable variations at local level for some of the more vulnerable groups such as care leavers, teenage mothers and young people from particular minority ethnic groups where the proportion often remains higher than for other young people.
- In a minority of councils progress towards coherent and collaborative 14 to 19 educational provision is slow. In some cases insufficient attention is given to equality of access. In others, provision for vocational education or work-based learning is inadequate and links between providers and employers are weak.
- Although Level 2 achievement by the age of 19 has improved, this improvement masks considerable local variation. In over 30 council areas the performance at Level 2 fell substantially compared with the previous year.
- The percentage of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who are not in education, employment or training has reduced slightly across the country in the past year, by 0.6% to 15.1% in 2006–07. This percentage is higher than that for other young people. In a minority of councils the need remains for further development of appropriate opportunities such as vocational courses and work-based learning programmes.

Capacity to improve including the management of children's services

Summary

The overall picture remains a good one: 118 of the 137 councils (86%) were judged good or excellent for their capacity to improve and for service management. The proportion in 2006 was 89%. However, whereas in 2006 two councils were judged as having an inadequate capacity to improve, no council was judged to have inadequate capacity in 2007.

Figure 2. The capacity for improvement in annual performance assessments (percentage of local authorities*)



*based on 137 local authorities.

Key strengths and features of higher performing councils

- Senior leaders and managers are a key factor in driving improvements. They provide well-informed, visionary, determined leadership. Successful senior leadership teams are usually stable, lack any complacency and are doggedly committed to the principle of empowering front line staff, children and young people.
- Senior managers are supported and challenged by elected members who work closely with their partners and embody the principle of corporate parenting. This demonstrates well an uncompromising focus on the needs of young people, especially the most vulnerable.
- Ambitions and priorities are realistic, articulated clearly, publicised, shared by partners, widely understood by stakeholders and directed at the well-being of children and young people. Priorities are informed by a comprehensive analysis of need that is wide-ranging, thorough, accurate and sharply focused on gaps in provision.
- Strong partnerships supported by good governance arrangements, effective information sharing protocols and the full involvement of the voluntary and community sector ensure that available resources are targeted carefully. There is more evidence of joint working and joint commissioning this year. In the best cases these are based explicitly on achieving improved outcomes for young people and are monitored closely.
- Partnership working is increasingly being implemented by staff who work in locally based teams that have a shared sense of direction and purpose and

common systems for induction, professional training and performance management systems.

- Plans are often precise and detailed; they focus clearly on outcomes, are costed and resourced, and drawn up in consultation with users and stakeholders. The Children and Young People's Plan is accessible and linked to other corporate plans; its review has been rigorous, leading to revised priorities to meet newly emerging needs.
- Open and transparent systems exist to monitor the implementation of plans on a regular basis, using key milestones and methods that are open and transparent. Good quality data are used in monitoring and reviewing work and are used proactively to challenge and set new priorities.
- Partners are clearly committed to listen to children and young people, their parents and carers and to facilitate their influence on services. Methods to involve users are innovative, wide-ranging, and have an emphasis on inclusion.

Areas for improvement and barriers to improvement

- Recent significant change in the senior leadership of children's services, in some cases arising from restructuring, has led in a small minority of councils to uncertainty and delays in progress. In these cases newly appointed leaders and managers have not yet had sufficient time for their approaches to have significant impact on performance. For example, in a few cases arrangements for Children's Trusts and Local Safeguarding Children's Boards have been slow and the governance and monitoring systems to drive improvement are ineffective.
- Where children's services are only adequate, plans, including the Children and Young People's Plan, are often not developed sufficiently in terms of targets, milestones and costings, and actions are not linked closely enough to outcomes for children and young people.
- Performance management arrangements in a small minority of councils lack rigour or are not well supported by data systems to help measure progress. Recently developed management systems have not yet had sufficient time to have a positive impact on performance.
- Joint working and joint commissioning arrangements, particularly those involving local groups, are slow to develop and work is not integrated sufficiently. At times, working arrangements between education and social care teams are not coherent enough so that there is confusion about how best to support particular groups of children and young people.
- Workforce difficulties continue to hamper progress. Particular difficulties exist for a small minority of councils in recruiting and retaining key front-line workers and managers, such as headteachers, teachers and staff qualified in social care. Where councils have recently tried to tackle some longstanding

problems by making changes, these have yet to translate into improved outcomes.

Notes

This report is based on the published outcomes of the APA of 137 councils carried out in 2007. In 2006, 102 councils had a 'stand alone' APA. The remaining councils in both years did not have an APA but had a joint area review and the grades from the review were carried forward into the Audit Commission's comprehensive performance assessment.

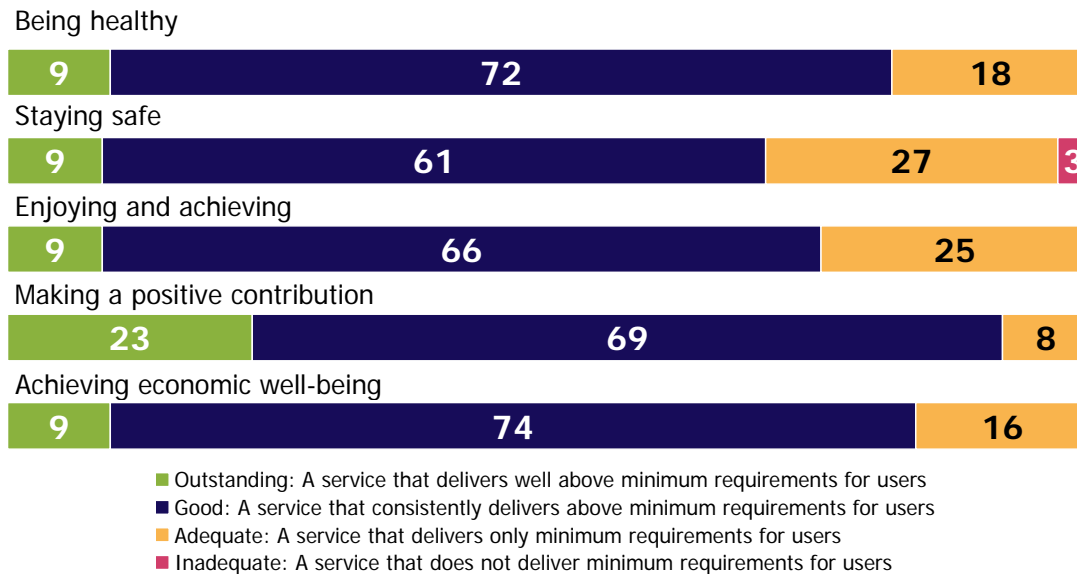
The report has been compiled following analysis of data retrieved from the 137 published APA letters together with the national APA dataset for 2006/07. In undertaking the APA a wide range of published evidence, including data and performance indicators, is considered alongside the council's review of its progress.

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

Proportion	Description
97–100%	Vast / overwhelming majority or almost all
80–96%	Very large majority, most
65–79%	Large majority
51–64%	Majority
35–49%	Minority
20–34%	Small minority
4–19%	Very small minority, few
0–3%	Almost no / very few

Annex A: the five outcomes

Overview of Every Child Matters outcomes in annual performance assessments (percentage of local authorities*)



*based on 137 local authorities.