

Narrowing the Gap in Children's Services

This Ofsted 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. What follows has been abstracted from the report, which can be found at: www.ofsted.gov.uk/assets/Internet_Content/Shared_Content/Files/2007/apr/narrowingthegap.pdf

Background

The report gives an overview of key themes emerging as councils and their partners work to deliver services that aim to improve outcomes for children and young people. It highlights strengths and weaknesses in each of the five Every Child Matters outcome areas, discusses capacity for improvement and highlights areas of good practice. Some examples of good practice cited in the report appear in the boxes.

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

Annual performance assessments 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. 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.

Good practice example...

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.

Findings

The assessment and review of children's services has been taking place against a rapidly changing background and in some cases it is too early to see the full impact. However, 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: 10 councils were rated as outstanding; 97 good; 28 adequate; 4 inadequate

Following analysis of key strengths and weaknesses in all outcomes, four key themes emerge:

- 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