

## **Narrowing the Gap – what really works**

### **A report on the first 6 months work of the Narrowing the Gap Programme**

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#### **Summary**

*This paper sets out the work being undertaken by the Narrowing the Gap Programme to identify what action should be taken by everyone working in children's services in order to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and to narrow the gap between their life chances and those of their peers. The programme employs a robust research approach, including action research methodologies, to identify 'what works' and produce accessible and readily applicable guidance.*

#### **Background and methodology**

Narrowing the Gap is a two year sector-led research, improvement and development programme which is funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), hosted by the Local Government Association (LGA) and supported by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA).

Its overriding purpose is ambitious: to make a significant difference, on a national scale, to the performance of Children's Trusts in narrowing the gap in outcomes for vulnerable and excluded children, against a backdrop of improving outcomes for all. The sharpest focus is on children aged 3-13 years, although children aged 0-3 years are included in the study and boundaries kept as flexible as possible.

The programme hopes to identify 'what is working' and 'what still needs to be done' in improving outcomes for vulnerable groups, by working with and through local authorities and their partners. It also hopes to ensure that everyone working with children and young people 'keeps the faith' with *Every Child Matters* three years on and shares effective practice.

It aims to answer the fundamental question – 'What is it that, if applied universally and pursued relentlessly, would make a significant impact on the outcomes of vulnerable groups of children and young people?' It does this by working to identify what the 'simple truths' are (rooted in evidence and tested in localities, across all 5 outcomes) that can be applied and adopted by everyone across children's services. On completion, the programme should deliver:

- Identification of best practice about what works and how best to disseminate it;
- Identification of models for growing and developing current and future leaders of children's services;
- Identification of different approaches adopted by local authorities working with others (strengthening the 'family' of local government) in delivering improved outcomes for children.

The programme is now part of the work of the new Centre for Excellence in Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO).

The 5 outcomes in question, of course, are those identified in *Every Child Matters*. We do have a focus on educational attainment (enjoying and achieving) for which we make no apology - improving attainment

depends a great deal on the other 4 and, in turn, contributes greatly towards those other 4 so we focus across all 5 equally.

By ‘narrowing the gap’ we mean the difference or deficit between outcomes for a specific group and the outcomes for the whole range of children and young people of which the group forms a part. It is clear from research and practice that some specific groups of children are more likely to fall behind than others. We identified 11 groups while acknowledging that there are many others and that some children belonged to more than one group.

The programme has 5 themes, and we worked on the first 3 of these in the first year. They are:

- How to create and sustain the right links between schools, children’s centres and Children’s Services;
- How to engage and support parents and carers in helping their children to succeed;
- How to use the new systems and processes brought into being by *Every Child Matters* to orientate services more towards prevention and early intervention.

In 2008/9, the programme is examining:

- How to strengthen and align local leadership and governance arrangements – both professional and political; and
- How to strengthen systems for developing local leaders to deliver improved services based on the understanding of what works.

The programme draws heavily on the ‘collaborative methodology’ successfully used by the CHIMP project and by the NHS. There are seven steps: Step 1 - agreeing the focus of the project; Step 2 - collating best practice as the basis for starting the project; Step 3 - identifying

hypotheses to test on the ground; Step 4 - testing hypotheses on the ground; Step 5 - supporting participants to learn; Step 6 - measuring the impact of change and assessing improvement over time; and Step 7 - sharing learning of what is and is not effective.

There are many excellent research projects and improvement programmes under way in children’s services at present but our approach is distinctive in three respects. First, it draws on the outcomes of rigorous evaluations of the research and the data, and on the expertise of key individuals and organisations to generate a series of hypotheses, which are then reality-checked ‘in the field’. Second, it focuses firmly on using the outputs from the fieldwork activities to answer some of the questions about ‘how’ to do things in localities that make a difference, scrutinising the detail of strategy and delivery at every level of the ‘*Every Child Matters* onion’. Third, it has adopted a collaborative way of working between central and local government and between participating local authorities in pursuit of shared goals. (Further information at <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk>)

### **What the project has done so far and where it is now**

An interim report was published in January 2008 and the full first-year report published in October 2008. ([www.c4eo.org.uk](http://www.c4eo.org.uk), [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)). The interim report contains a significant amount of material, including reports on two research studies commissioned from The National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) at the start of the programme.

The research studies have sought to present the best data that highlights the extent and nature of the gap in outcomes between the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people and the general population and the most compelling evidence on ‘*what works*’ in making a

positive difference in outcomes to the lives of these children and young people, and in doing so in improving the outcomes for all.

The first study (Kendall *et al.*, 2008) is a review of the current literature and research on the subject of narrowing the gap. This study found that the majority of texts included in the review either did not focus on a specific vulnerable group or look at outcomes from a range of vulnerable groups. It also found that the material was most likely to focus on enjoyment and achievement, and least likely to focus on achieving economic well-being. There was a shortage of robust longitudinal studies and, in general, very little is known (except in education) about ‘what works’.

The second study (Morris *et al.*, 2008) is an overview and analysis of the nationally-available datasets on vulnerable groups, the first time such an exercise has been done. The study sought to identify what useful and comparable data was (and was not) readily available on each of the outcomes for vulnerable groups. It established that there were significant gaps, overlaps and inconsistencies in the datasets and that the overall quality and nature of data on many of the outcomes was: insufficiently detailed to allow a gap to be identified; not collected in a way that facilitated accurate comparisons over time and insufficiently robust to enable judgements to be made as to whether gaps were widening or narrowing.

Overall, the evidence appears to validate the policy direction of *Every Child Matters* (ECM) – with its strong focus on prevention and early intervention and the prioritisation of support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children in their early years. There are a number of key messages arising from the research which have been published as part of the second report.

Drawing on these research findings and messages, on other research (over 80

studies) and, recognising the current shortage of extensive research evidence about what works, on evidence from an extensive professional and expert programme network of key individuals in their field, a series of papers (called ‘templates’ in this project) were created by the members of the programme’s core team. These set out what the team hypothesised to be the critical building blocks for narrowing the gap. They were synthesised from the research material and based on the outcome of rigorous discussion and cross checking with programme network members, plus extensive discussion with practitioners and leaders in children’s services.

There are 5 of these templates, with the following themes:

- What children’s centres and other early years settings can do;
- What needs to be in place between schools and other services (extended schools);
- What schools can do to narrow the gap;
- What constitutes the most effective practice in engaging parents and carers;
- How to re-orientate systems, processes and services towards early intervention and prevention.

The templates organise and present their material in two different ways: first, by reference to the layers of the *Every Child Matters* ‘onion’, that is, according to what is needed at the level of integrated frontline delivery, processes, strategy and governance; and second, by moving across the ‘progressive universalist’ spectrum, starting with what is needed for all children (universal services), then moving to what is required by vulnerable children with additional needs (targeted services), then children with complex and multiple needs (targeted/specialist services) and, finally, children in need of care or protection (specialist services). This sounds

complicated but makes sense when you see it in practice; it should also be noted that each template has a simple summary page at the front.

The templates present what is needed at every level of the system, locally, to narrow the gap. The paper setting out the hypotheses makes it clear that the team had enough evidence to be satisfied that they (the hypotheses) have to be taken together, applied universally and pursued relentlessly in order to achieve significant change. In other words, they are not a 'pick and mix list' but a recipe for whole-system change. This is inherently challenging and one of the important questions as the project progresses is exactly *how* Children's Trusts can deliver change on this scale, what support they need to do so, and how this is best provided.

Once the templates were complete, a series of statements were then drawn up by the core team about 'what works' in narrowing the gap across all the dimensions being considered in the first year of the project, by drawing out the factors that appeared to be common across all the templates.

These statements, called 'Golden Threads' in this project, were written up into a short paper with some initial ideas for what they might imply in practice, in order to spark more thoughts from readers – particularly Councils and their partners. They are:

- **You can do it! (Expect the best)** - Creating a culture of high aspirations and giving children and parents access to a trusted adult;
- **Together with parents** - Working in real partnership with parents and families and building on their strengths;
- **Through the eyes of the child** - Making all services more child and family-centred and adult services more

sensitive to their clients as parents, and alert to the needs of children;

- **Holding onto the baton** - Ensuring as much stability and continuity as possible in the relationships between trusted adults with children and parents; managing those transitions that are unavoidable with care;
- **Learning to learn** - Making the building of children's resilience a major policy objective including, for example, configuring education so it benefits the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, encouraging their participation and giving them lots of supplementary and 'catch up' support;
- **Cornflakes to canoeing** - Taking active steps to make extended services available to all disadvantaged or vulnerable children – within and beyond the school;
- **Unite to succeed – 'sanity not vanity'** - Deepening the integration of services, systems and processes;
- **Shape up and keep fit** - Reshaping the workforce and ensuring it is appropriately trained, supported and celebrated;
- **Prove it – making change happen** - Having the right performance management system in place nationally and locally: one that encourages a focus on improving outcomes generally and those of vulnerable groups in particular, and on shared approaches to this across services, including Health;
- **From good to great – 'passion with purpose'** - Having transformational leadership in place, politically and among officers/officials: a clear vision communicated well and the planning

and processes to back it up and deliver results.

We originally expected about 30 Local Authorities with their Children's Trust partners to volunteer to work with us. In fact, we began work with 96 participating authorities and this figure has subsequently grown to over 100. This positive response is noteworthy, particularly since no financial incentive was offered. The strong take-up may have been for a number of reasons, but among them is almost certainly the fact that participants liked the collaborative approach adopted.

Since the interim report was published we have, by engaging with a cross section of service staff and key partners from the 100 participating local authorities, working in 9 regional workshops (1 for each region) between February and May 2008, been able to:

- Reality-check the 'Golden Threads' with Children's Trusts;
- Give them the chance to amend and add to them; and crucially
- Consider with Children's Trusts how they can move from where they are now to where this project suggests they need to be in their localities in order to narrow the gap.

The workshops have facilitated genuine 'sector-led' improvement; provided Children's Trusts with a clear analysis of 'what makes the difference'; generated a 'product' from each session; and reinforced collaborative working across the region, with a focus on 'narrowing the gap'.

The second report adds 2 further statements, making a total of 12 Golden Threads:

- **It takes a community to raise a child**
  - Recognising the power of communities to support children and adults;

- **Culture not structure** – 'Shared vision, shared behaviour' – ensuring that organisational culture, and the way individual practitioners work, underpins structural change focusing on high aspirations for all children.

It also contains the final 5 self-evaluation tools, containing just those critical building blocks the action research stage of the programme confirmed were sound and evidence based.

### **What can be learned from the Narrowing the Gap project so far**

It is important to recognise that the first report was published at a relatively early stage of the project: the way it has been designed means the most significant outcomes will not emerge until the end. However, it is legitimate to draw out some conclusions about what has emerged from the research and data reviews, templates and hypotheses and from the project's general approach.

Every element of the project so far supports the overall direction of policy in this area as was set out originally within *Every Child Matters* and as has been developed since. This may not be surprising but it is reassuring, nonetheless!

The importance of the Government's role as 'leader of the system' emerges very strongly, particularly its responsibility to articulate, simply and clearly, what is required of people and organisations at every level and to provide a sense of drive and purpose. This implies the need for a step-change, using the formation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Children's Plan as a springboard.

As the project has developed, the need for schools to be linked closely to other services (as a critical means of improving outcomes for children and narrowing the gap) has

become increasingly pronounced. This reflects and reinforces the contents of the Children's Plan (which the project also informed). If the gap is to be narrowed everywhere, the notion of the school as a community asset must be given every emphasis.

Narrowing the gap requires major changes in a number of respects at local level so strong local leadership is required. This is not a task that can be left to Directors of Children's Services alone; members also have crucial roles to play and need to be on board.

The data analysis reveals some major gaps in the data currently available in this area. The data analysis also shows that, while there has been progress in narrowing the gap for some groups over the last few years, for others the gap remains unchanged or has even grown. It is significant that groups for whom the gap has narrowed – e.g. black African Caribbean children and children in care – are those for whom there has been a clear focus of policy and resources, nationally and locally.

The importance of building children's resilience and non-cognitive skills comes through over and over again. It is not clear that this is yet sufficiently well-understood by every part of the system, nationally and locally, or that the implications for policy, services and training have yet been worked through. The significance of Health in narrowing the gap is also strongly implied by every aspect of this project to date.

### **Lessons for practice and messages for Children's Trusts**

The templates that have been produced are a rich potential source of insight and knowledge for staff in Children's Trusts. They have the capacity to act as a kind of checklist for existing policies and practices, and as a means of stimulating new ideas.

The hypotheses, or Golden Threads, with which participating Councils will be working in the next phase of the project, operate at a more strategic level than the templates and so may be of particular interest to Directors of Children's Services, officers involved in planning and strategy in Children's Services, and Local Authority members.

The summaries of the data and the research, produced by NFER, offer direct route-ways into a complex set of issues and should be accessible to members and officers at all levels. Policy teams in Children's Services may also find them useful starting points for their work.

Having said this, it is important for colleagues in Children's Trusts to remember that the most significant outcomes will only emerge at the end of the project, once what they do in their localities has informed the products of these analyses of policy, data and research, and helped generate a list of mechanisms that can be widely employed.

### **Next steps**

Between June 2008 and March 2009, the final two themes will be worked on, using the same methodology deployed this year (possibly with some slight modifications depending on the lessons learned):

- How to strengthen and align local leadership and governance arrangements (both professional and political); and
- How to strengthen systems for developing local leaders to deliver improved services based on an understanding of what works.

These themes will include professional and political leaders of Children's Services (i.e. Lead Members, Scrutiny leads, Council Leaders), as well as Directors of Children's

Services. IDeA and LGA will be closely involved.

The digest of effective practice for these two themes will be completed by June 2009.

## Conclusion

The progress made to date is extremely encouraging but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, in generating improvements in our capacity to narrow the gap in localities and in achieving demonstrable success. It is easy to stand back from the project now, look at the implications to date and ask 'so what?' because, in many ways, there have been no real surprises so far.

There are several responses to this potential challenge. First, it is not necessarily a bad thing for a rigorous methodology to confirm that we are broadly heading in the right direction. Second, some elements do come through more strongly than might have been expected – e.g. the significance of building children's resilience or of having a trusted adult for parents as well as children. Third, this stage of the project does no more than lay the foundations for what is to come; what is important is that those foundations are strong and well-informed. Finally, the project's inclusive methodology should help to generate the conditions which make it successful.

The reports are available on the Narrowing the Gap section of the C4EO website, [www.c4eo.org.uk](http://www.c4eo.org.uk), and the Narrowing the Gap section of the LGA website, [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk) (under children and young people).

## References

Kendall, S., Straw, S., Jones, M., Springate, I. & Grayson, H. (2008) *A Review of the Research Evidence (Narrowing the Gap in Outcomes for Vulnerable Groups)*, Slough: NFER.

Morris, M., Rutt, S., Kendall, L. & Mehta, P. (2008) *Overview and Analysis of Available Datasets on Vulnerable Groups and the 5 ECM Outcomes (Narrowing the Gap in Outcomes for Vulnerable Groups)*, Slough: NFER.

## Notes on Contributor

Jane Held has 30 years of experience in Social Care. For 15 years she worked directly with looked after children. She continued to specialise in Children's Services and held a number of senior management posts, most recently as Director of Social Services in the London Borough of Camden. She is now working independently. She has worked on a range of projects relating to children's policy and has extensive experience of safeguarding practice, operationally, and at strategic and policy level. She has undertaken a number of Serious Case Reviews and other investigations and reviews linked to practice. Working for a range of national public sector bodies, including the LGA, DCSF, IDeA, and CSCI, she is currently an operational lead for The Narrowing the Gap Programme, a DCSF sponsored programme looking at narrowing the gap between vulnerable children and their peers.

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