



Knowledge is power: using data effectively

Directors' summary May 2011

Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services

We frequently fail to make effective use of the data we already gather, let alone gather and use systematically what would help us to make real progress. Existing data, well used and interrogated, would often highlight needs earlier. And asking the right questions would often lead to more effective forms of intervention.

Grasping the nettle: early intervention for children, families and communities

Proposed new legislation affecting schools, health and communities, together with the ongoing reviews of safeguarding and the national curriculum, signal a major period of change in children's services. Set against the climate of unprecedented reductions in funding, this presents the sector with significant challenges to meet requirements and deliver services effectively, whilst continuing to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Strategic leaders must be able to understand the nature and needs of their communities, as well as performance information about services being provided, in order to meet these challenges successfully. The move away from nationally imposed inspection and performance frameworks to a self-assessment and sector-led framework has the potential to give children's services organisations a better opportunity to develop and use the intelligence that data can provide locally. Knowledge is power - the evidence that data provides should be used as an integral part of the commissioning, monitoring and improvement process but also as an aid to innovation.

This summary outlines the reasons why data is critical in helping to paint that local picture. It includes key questions leaders need to be asking and signposts tools which can help improve access to, understanding and use of data.

What do we know?

Knowing the answers to the questions 'how well are we doing?' 'are we improving?' and 'how much does it cost?' have always been critical for directors of children's services and managers, as well as those bodies who govern and inspect children's services. To fully understand how to get to where we want to be, data helps us to understand where we have come from, where we are now; and importantly how long we've been here.

The research shows that in general, the sector doesn't use data well. Effective local analysis of need and interpretation of data remain areas where the workforce and data systems need to be developed. The term 'data' can be misunderstood or mean different things to different people. Data is not something that only IT professionals or analysts deal with. It can be defined as information which anybody can interpret to provide intelligence about people or services – in terms of quantity, characteristics and outcomes.

We also know that service delivery is more successful when it is targeted effectively and reflects the needs of the people using services. Good, accurate and meaningful local data is essential in ensuring this personalisation in service delivery, as well as successful commissioning of services, which is critical when examining the case for early intervention.

What next?

As resources become increasingly scarce, it is essential that the data we collect, analyse and measure has a purpose; namely for the services we provide to make a difference and improve outcomes for children and young people. Too often performance measures concentrate on *outputs* rather than *outcomes*.

For example, *the timeliness of Initial and Core Assessments* is an indicator which measures a process; whilst a more outcomes-focused approach would examine if the child was better off following the assessment – did it make a difference?



It is important that links are made between these different types of data:

- knowing the needs of communities to commission, deliver and measure services
- outcomes for children and young people and what they think about the services
- whether services have made a difference.

The following questions may help local authorities and their partners achieve this for themselves:

Q1 Who are our partners that have a role to play in providing data or helping us to improve?

Where can we obtain data from? Who needs to be involved in collecting, analysing or using data? Do we know what children, young people and families think about our services (voice of the customer)? Who can help us to make improvements?

Q4 Are there any gaps and where do we need to be in the future?

Can we identify any future changes to our communities that will affect how we deliver services or to whom? Where do we need to improve – either or specific groups of children, localities or outcomes? Can we set a clear vision about what we want to achieve by when?

Q2 What is the picture in our local area?

Who are the children in our communities and are our services meeting their needs? Where have we come from (historic data), and where are we now (current data)? How do we compare to similar areas and the national average? Are our services meeting the needs of our communities? Do we know what 'good' looks like and how we compare to areas of best practice?

Q5 How cost effective are the services we are providing and do they offer value for money?

Do we know the unit costs of the services we provide? How do they compare with other areas or other services providing similar outcomes (especially early intervention services)? Is there a high social return on investment for the services we provide?

Q3 Are we clear about measuring outputs and outcomes?

Can we distinguish between having data on whether people using our service are better off and whether we are delivering services well? Do we have both sets of data available?

Q6 Do we make best use of data in our local authority?

Are our IT systems capable of producing the right information at the right time? Are our workforce able and confident to collect, analyse and use the right data appropriately, including the voice of the customer? Do we have a robust performance management framework?

Where should you start?

What do I need to know?

How can I understand the picture in my local authority (LA)?

How do I find out?

Working with your partners, undertake a detailed needs analysis and interrogate datasets available to you. Gather data on vulnerable groups, free school meals, Special Education Needs and looked after Children. Include data on health and crime to provide as full a picture as possible. Use the 'Wedge' tool to contextualise the profile of your local population and the costs of providing services to them.

Example: Children who are eligible for free school meals are 3.5 times less likely to achieve five A*-C grades including English and Maths than their peers who are not.

Who else can help?

C4EO Sector and Data Specialists can provide advice and support to you and your teams when they undertake the needs analysis and to provide insight into what it might mean. They will help you avoid the common pitfalls that arise with needs analysis, such as collecting data for its own sake and consequently becoming data rich but information poor.

C4EO Sector and Data Specialists can also help LAs identify whether the systems they have in place are able to deliver the information required to make informed decisions. Use the C4EO guidance on 'how to undertake a needs assessment'.

How well are we performing?

Examine the results of the needs analysis using the C4EO data tool which provides sophisticated online benchmarking information that will enable your teams to compare the LA with the national, regional and your statistical neighbours

Look for any gaps in service provision or groups or localities of children and young people where outcomes are lower than their peers.

C4EO Sector and Data Specialists can support your service managers and data teams to answer the key questions LAs need to answer:

Where are we doing well?

Where are our areas of weakness?

What is the trend?

How can I decide if our services are cost-effective?

C4EO provides a cost and outcomes web-based template, along with a user guide, to support LAs to calculate the unit cost of interventions or universal services in their areas. The C4EO website also provides access to a bank of effective local practice, with an analysis of impact and costs along with a tool guide to begin to calculate the social return on investment.

Example: The average placement costs of a child looked after in a children's home are £125,000 per year.

C4EO can provide support from a team of accredited financial specialists to help local areas use the web-based tools and calculate the unit cost of their universal and targeted services, along with support to model the cost of replicating effective local practice in individual areas (conceptual modeling) to aid service redesign.

How can I begin the improvement process without investing significant resources?

The OBA toolkit on the C4EO website provides local authorities with guidance on how to undertake a 'turning the curve' exercise. This doesn't have to be time-consuming or lengthy. It can consist of a short meeting, focused on one 'tough nut to crack'. In analysing and understanding trend data, LAs can develop a strategy for achieving better outcomes. Then, by plotting the data on a graph, and developing data scorecards they can discover what needs to be done to 'turn the curve' or change direction.

C4EO Sector and Data Specialists can provide advice and support to you and your teams in carrying out the exercise and workshops introducing OBA. They can also facilitate bringing together the key partners to ensure the process delivers successful outcomes.

Pulling the strands together

The C4EO Data, Cost Effectiveness and the Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) tools provide a framework for improving the effectiveness of use of data and answer some of the questions raised in this summary. Where local authorities need to commission services, the tools help to create a robust, credible and objective way of making decisions about the use of limited resources so that they have maximum positive impact on the lives of children and families.

When these tools are linked – either directly by using the C4EO website or by accessing tailored support from C4EO Sector and Data Specialists, they provide the key components that enable LAs to create the shift of emphasis toward an outcomes-based approach to service delivery.



Data about the population, services and outcomes for children and young people	C4EO data tool: A local authority profile; range of pre-set needs assessments; custom reports and links to over 250 other datasets	Local and other data sources: Own data systems, voice of the customer, partnership data	C4EO cost effectiveness tool: Calculates unit costs and social return on investment	C4EO needs assessment guidance
Analysis and improvement planning	C4EO OBA toolkit		C4EO research summaries, publications and validated local practice	

Who else should be involved?

- local authority, partnership and children’s services performance management and data teams
- finance teams
- commissioners
- strategic leaders, managers and budget holders
- other children’s services such as schools and colleges; community and voluntary sector partners; acute and community health services including GPs; police, community safety workers and youth offending teams
- IT suppliers.

For more information see www.c4eo.org.uk/data

Stay involved with C4EO

- The C4EO website includes a range of support and data about your local area for you to access and compare with other areas.
- Encourage practitioners to put themselves forward to be C4EO Sector Specialists.
- Access support from C4EO as part of the Tailored Support scheme provided by accredited and trained experts on the theme priorities.
- Make sure your organisation submits examples of local validated practice. Examples can be entered onto the C4EO website.