

7 the next steps





Looking ahead – some concluding thoughts

“A major objective for this government is to reduce the inequalities between poor and disadvantaged children and the rest, to support social justice and social mobility. So it’s not just that services for vulnerable families must make a difference, they have to do so in a way that helps those children make up ground on others.”

Beverley Hughes, Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, 15 Oct 2007

why narrowing the gap is important

Improving outcomes for all children and young people is self-evidently desirable. But there is significant variation in outcomes within and between groups of children, frequently related to social and economic factors. As a consequence, many children, often concentrated into particular disadvantaged groups, fail to fulfil their individual potential – and such inequalities tend to persist into adulthood and on into subsequent generations. This not only raises the issues of social justice and social mobility referred to by Beverley Hughes (above), but generates many problems which affect others, require a great deal of public expenditure to address, and reduce the capacity of the nation to respond successfully to the increasing opportunities and challenges of globalisation and international competition.

Narrowing the Gap is thus critical to our national economic and social well-being, so **everybody** has an interest in its success.

where we are now

Before the establishment of the present project, progress had been made in a number of quarters,

both to identify the nature and scale of the issue and to develop working practices to improve the situation – but work has been piecemeal, and progress has been limited. A key aim of the NtG project is to draw together what has been learned so far and, through the involvement of major stakeholders, to identify a more strategic approach through which this knowledge can be applied to bring about a significant acceleration in the rate of improvement. Whilst we know a lot about what works, we still don’t know enough.

We know that, at present, children from higher socio-economic groups do better at every stage of the system than those from lower groups and that, generally, those who do well early do even better later in life, whilst those who do less well early fall further behind. However, poor children with high ability at age two are often ‘overtaken’ by better off children with lower ability at age two by the time they reach seven – so socio-economic group is currently a better predictor of later attainment than early ability. We also know that pupils doing better than average at age seven are more than twice as likely as those doing poorly to achieve a degree level qualification by age 25, and that the gap between the best and worst performers actually increases as they pass through our education system. International comparisons show that the gap is both significantly wider and more closely tied to social class in this country than elsewhere. It has also been shown that the variation in pupil performance within UK schools is far greater than the variation between schools. So, the potential benefits of paying close attention to the progress of every child from an early age, and of intervening early to try and prevent children from falling behind are clear – in other words, of deliberately and actively focusing on narrowing the gap.

The quality of teaching and learning in schools is central to improving progress, but so too is the support of disadvantaged and vulnerable children in their family context – and local authorities have a key role in both: through their monitoring, challenge and support function in relation to schools; and through their significantly expanded role as strategic leaders, partnership brokers, place shapers, service commissioners and overseers of quality and improvement. This includes not only their duties at the heart of Children’s Trust arrangements (including education more broadly, of course), but also their responsibilities for a range of other activities which affect the lives of children and their families – for example, housing, adult social services, economic development and regeneration, and leisure services.

Following the creation in the summer 2007 of the new Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the government is now better placed to take a more coherent approach to children’s policy, and in December 2007 published *The Children’s Plan: Building brighter futures*. This is set out in those chapters covering the Department’s strategic objectives (which include closing the gap in educational achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds), and makes clear the government’s high expectations of local authorities, which are laid out in some detail.

After a period which saw the introduction of a succession of largely separate initiatives (sometimes characterised as ‘tinkering around the edges’ and ‘bolting on’ developments), we are now in a period of more deliberate whole system change. *The Children’s Plan* sets out the big picture, and the NtG project is tackling a key aspect of it.

looking forward

Despite the lack of robust evidence, there is no doubt that leadership matters. For a variety of reasons, making effective progress on narrowing the gaps across the range of outcomes, in all settings and for all vulnerable groups has proved a

major challenge. Yet individual examples exist across the board which demonstrate the possibility of change. It is clear that to bring this about universally a significantly different climate is required, in which the well-being of all children becomes a responsibility far more actively shared by all those engaged in the provision of services. Strong leadership is required – nationally, locally and in professional teams of all kinds – to drive the whole system change needed to bring about a permanent shift in culture which properly recognises that the well-being of the nation is largely determined by the well-being of its children.

It is the role of political leaders, nationally and locally, to articulate the need for such a change, to create the social climate in which it can be sustained, and to secure the resources and conditions which will enable the work of professionals to flourish. It is the task of professional leaders to ensure that the staff and resources for which they are responsible are deployed to maximum effect. A widely shared sense of common purpose is obviously essential to success. *The Children’s Plan* and the NtG project are moving this process forward.

Many of the ingredients for success are already in place. There is more coherence of approach from central government, and greater political consensus about the change required. There is greater clarity about the respective roles of central and local government, the importance of effective partnership working to tackle complex issues, and the need to engage service users (children, young people and their families) in the design and delivery of provision. And many structures now exist to align provision and practice more closely with objectives – including public service agreements, local (and multi) area agreements, partnership arrangements to promote collaboration between institutions and providers, and integration of professional disciplines within teams. But challenges remain.

There is a continuing need for greater clarity, and an even stronger emphasis, around the importance of

narrowing the gap whilst improving outcomes for all. The incentives which contribute to changing practice and improving performance – including financial benefit, inspectorial judgements and publication of performance outcomes – are not yet consistently aligned to encourage a stronger focus on the disadvantaged and vulnerable. The necessity of maintaining acute provision inhibits greater investment in preventative approaches. And the benefits of greater coherence across government which lie behind the creation of the DCSF have yet to be fully realised, but should go a long way towards harmonising the demands of central government with the developments which have taken place (and continue) in response to *Every Child Matters* and the Children Act 2005.

Despite considerable progress in raising standards of provision, and reducing the incidence of poor practice, workforce development remains a major challenge which is central to the achievement of consistent improvement across the system; the children's plan outlines a range of activities aimed at accelerating and harmonising workforce development, but it inevitably takes time as staff across disciplines and settings increase their levels of qualification. Building the capacity of present and future leaders to embrace the demands of delivering services which are configured very differently from only a few years ago is another major undertaking. Strengthening local leadership and governance arrangements, and the systems for developing leaders to deliver improved services on the basis of an understanding of what works will be an increasing focus of the NtG project in the year ahead.

Martin Rogers, policy consultant to the Children's Services Network

narrowing the gap – next steps

fieldwork with local authorities and their partners (March – May 2008)

Thanks to additional financial support from DCSF we will be working with all 96 participating local authorities through two meetings in January; and engaging a cross section of service staff and key partners through **nine regional workshops (one for each region)** between February and May.

These workshops will be supported by the government offices for the regions and will have a national spine in terms of content and format, but will also be genuinely collaborative.

The workshops will facilitate genuine ‘sector-led’ improvement; provide Children’s Trusts with a clear analysis of ‘what makes the difference’; generate a ‘product’ from each session; and reinforce collaborative working across the region, with a focus on ‘narrowing the gap’. DCSF teams, such as the Parenting Implementation Group, along with the Cabinet Office’s Social Exclusion Unit, will also have the opportunity to consult with local authorities through the nine regional workshops.

In addition, there will be an **in-depth challenge workshop with nine highly performing Children’s Trusts (one per region)** to test out the main findings which emerge from the regional workshops.

The work on the first three themes will conclude with two further half day workshops with director of children’s services in May and at least one full day national conference to disseminate findings in June.

The outcomes from the fieldwork will be contained in a **final digest of ‘effective practice’ in July 2008**.

communities of interest (ongoing – March 2009)

Communities of interest have been established, involving a wide range of stakeholders. Work is ongoing, drawing on supporting practice in ‘narrowing the gap’ across the sector (public, voluntary and private).

The ‘digest of leading effective practice’, developed from the fieldwork, will **signpost local authorities and their partners** to the more detailed work being undertaken by these organisations (such as the TDA, NCSL, GTC, CWDC, GSCC, CSCI, SCIE, NAPP, CSN and many others) which support ‘narrowing the gap’.

an interactive website and network (ongoing)

This is being set up through the IDeA and the first (universal) stage should ‘go live’ at the beginning of February 2008. The website will provide universal access to the products and research evidence arising from the project and provide links through to evidence. It will complement the DCSF ECM website, and be linked in due course to other websites relating to the children’s sector.

It will also give a **platform for participating local authorities to communicate** with each other and agencies across the Children’s sector – to share the work they are doing in testing the hypotheses and templates, and to share effective practice, models and materials.

a comprehensive review of regional, local and sensitive data sets and mapping of all on-going research (to be completed February 2008)

NFER have been commissioned to undertake a third comprehensive review of regional, local and sensitive data sets and map all current on-going research being conducted by University departments and others. This third review will be completed by February 2008. It will complement the first two reviews contained in this pack and will provide for the first time a full overview of what data is collected, by whom and where, and what is being researched. It will identify the gaps, as well as where research and evaluation is covering similar ground, and will assist in making links across research communities.

a 'call for evidence' (January–April 2008)

The project will be putting out a 'Call for Evidence' through the mainstream and specialist newspapers and journals (*Local Government Chronicle*, *Children and Young People Now* and *Community Care*). This 'call' will seek examples of effective practice (rooted in evidence) from any organisation, service or group involved anywhere in the country, including Wales, Scotland and Ireland. This will run between January and April 2008. All the evidence received will be analysed. Where it provides examples of well evidenced effective practice it will be compiled in an interim report that will contribute to the final compendium of good practice.

Some particularly strong examples of well evaluated practice, with outcomes based evidence to support them, will be identified and the originators asked to come and give evidence to a hearing which will be held in the House of Lords on the 17 April 2008. This detailed material will be contained in the final report arising from the call for evidence – published June 2008, chaired by Baroness Estelle Morris.

June 2000–March 2009

the final two themes

- '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'

will be investigated following the same methodology used to pursue the first three themes in 2007–2008. These themes will include professional and political leaders of children's services (ie lead members, scrutiny leads, council leaders), as well as directors of children's services. The digest of effective practice for these two themes will be completed by March 2009.

