



## Narrowing the Gap – frequently asked questions

February 2009

### What is Narrowing the Gap?

Narrowing the Gap (NtG) is a two-year programme hosted by the Local Government Association (LGA), supported by Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and funded by Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Its aim is to narrow the gap in outcomes between vulnerable and excluded children and others, against a context of improving outcomes for all.

Since October 2008 the programme has been overseen by C4EO.

The NtG programme focuses on five key lines of enquiry:

- 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 process brought into being by Every Child Matters to orientate services more towards prevention and early intervention
- how to strengthen and align local leadership and governance arrangements – professional and political
- how to strengthen systems for developing local leaders to deliver improved services based on the understanding of 'what works'.

The programme has a small core team of experienced sector experts, led by Christine Davies, which includes Dame Gillian Pugh and Jane Held (former Director of Camden).

The core team, drawing on evidence of good practice from across the sector, combined with comprehensive reviews of available literature, research and data undertaken by National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), has produced draft guidance of 'what works' for the first three lines of enquiry. A final digest of effective practice for these lines of enquiry, was produced in November 2008.

Investigation of the final two lines of enquiry will run from October 2008 to March 2009.

On completion, the project should provide:

- 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 models of Local Authorities supporting/developing the work of other Local Authorities (strengthening the 'family of local government') in delivering improved outcomes for children.

### **Who is involved?**

The project is led by Christine Davies CBE, former Director of Children's Services (DCS) in Telford & Wrekin, who is supported by a core team, which includes Dame Gillian Pugh (former Chief Executive of Coram Family), Jane Held (former Director of London Borough of Camden), and other senior figures. A wider working group of highly experienced individuals from a range of backgrounds and a programme board of senior representatives of key organisations oversaw the general direction of the project in Year One. A reference group is advising on Year Two. An extensive programme network of organisations from across the children's sector is providing further help and encouragement. Children's Services Network, National Children's Bureau, Improvement and Development Agency, National Foundation for Educational Research, Research in Practice, Social Care Institute for Excellence, Audit Commission, Children's Workforce Development Council, Training and Development Agency, National College for School Leadership, ODA and Office Public Management.

### **How will NtG link into C4EO?**

The NtG programme is overseen by C4EO under the overall direction of Christine Davies, supported by the core and strategic partners. Since October 2008 the programme has been integrated within the work of C4EO.

Day-to-day responsibility for ensuring that NtG's agreed work is delivered to its conclusion will be undertaken by Dame Gillian Pugh and Jane Held, working with the existing core team and reporting to the Director of C4EO.

The NtG wider working group remains in place but the oversight function of the previous NtG Programme Board has been subsumed within the C4EO Programme Board, given that the membership of core and strategic partners, DCSF and stakeholder representation are the same.

This will ensure a sustained focus on outcomes for vulnerable groups of children and young people beyond the two-year life of the NtG programme. At the same time, the rigorous project methodology and early findings of NtG provide firm foundations for C4EO's work.

In addition, local areas will find the integration of the programmes helpful in rationalising the inputs and support they receive.

### **What is meant by 'narrowing the gap'?**

The term 'gap', in this context, means the difference in outcomes for a specific group, and outcomes for the whole range of children and young people of which the group forms a part. This project in particular is concerned with improving outcomes for vulnerable children and those who

are most at risk, with a view to reducing the differences in outcomes between these groups and children and young people as a whole, whilst improving outcomes for all. The outcomes we mean are those identified in Every Child Matters: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being.

### **What are ‘vulnerable’ children?**

We know from practice and research that some groups of children are more likely to fall behind than others: these are set out below, and have helped form the framework for the project. Many children belong to more than one of the groups, of course, and, for most, the gap is in more than one outcome. They include:

- children from poorer socioeconomic groups (including white ‘working class’ boys)
- children in care
- children with disabilities
- children with special educational needs
- children excluded from school
- children with poor records of attendance at school
- children from different ethnic minority backgrounds
- young offenders
- young carers
- children at risk from significant harm
- children living with ‘vulnerable’ adults
- children not fluent in English
- children who are asylum seekers/refugees.

### **What are the distinctive features of the NtG project approach?**

There are many excellent research projects and improvement programmes underway in children’s services at present, but NtG’s approach is distinctive in three respects:

1. 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 about ‘what works’. These hypotheses will then be ‘reality checked’ by councils and their partners on the ground, who will also add their own insights. This way of combining the best from practice, policy and research is innovative and, we hope, will be hugely creative and productive.
2. It focuses firmly on using the outputs of all the activities being undertaken to answer some simple questions about ‘how’ to do things in localities to make a difference to narrowing the gap; scrutinising the detail of strategy and delivery at every level of the Every Child Matters ‘onion’. We hope they will result in a series of evidence-based mechanisms for ‘narrowing the gap’, which councils and their partners can adapt to the circumstances of their areas and the needs of their populations.
3. It adopts a truly collaborative way of working between central and local government, and between participating Local Authorities, in pursuit of shared goals, thus reflecting the spirit of last year’s Local Government White Paper and offering a model for public service reform

that is inclusive and cost effective and that, we hope, will be transformative in its impact on children and communities.