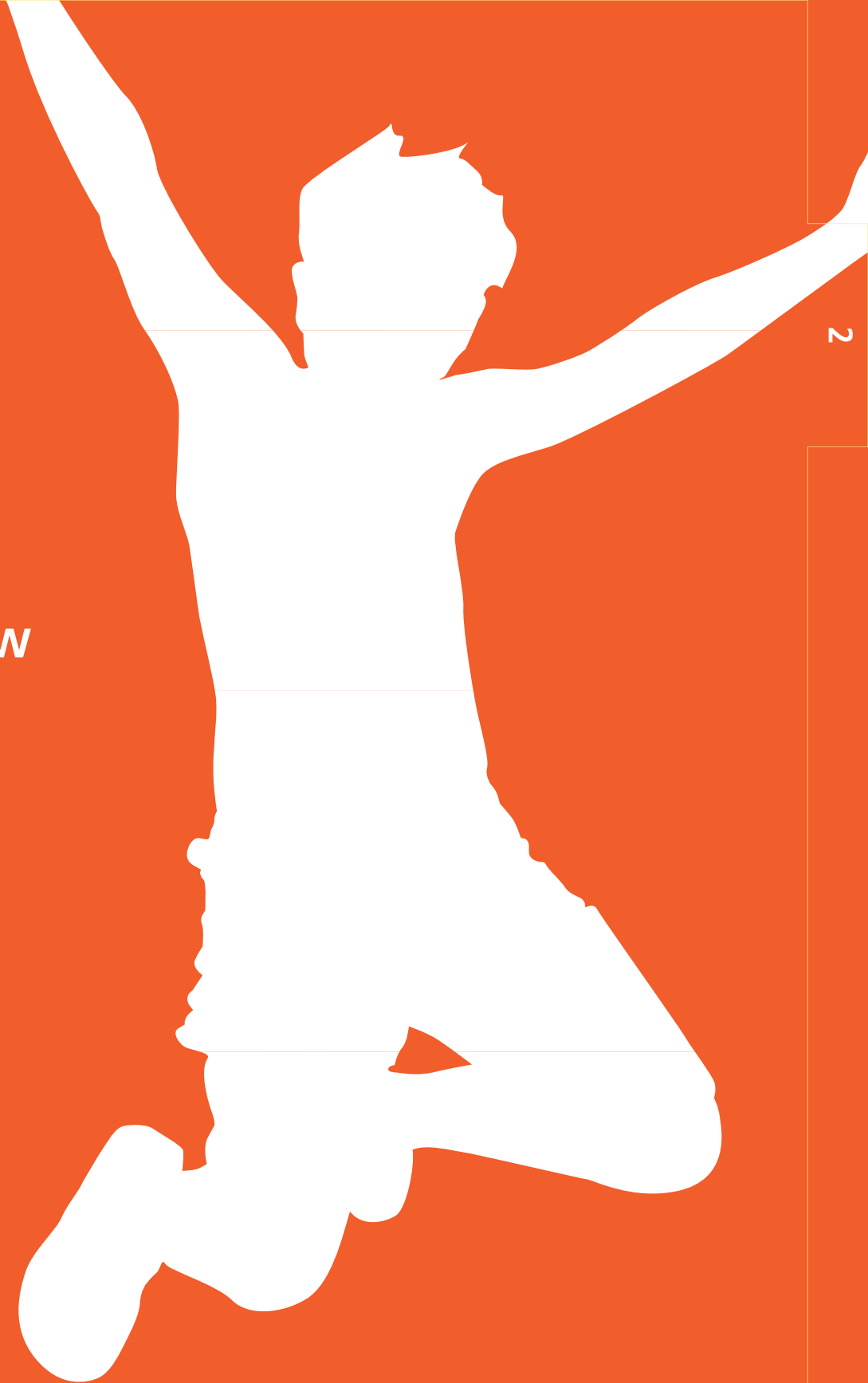


## 2 narrowing the gap – an overview





**This short paper is being written six months – or a quarter of the way – into the Narrowing the Gap project. The paper's aims are to draw out what has emerged from the project to date; to explain how this may legitimately inform policy and practice even at this early stage; and briefly to look forward to the next phases of the project. A further briefing paper will be produced in six months' time.**

The paper is not meant to be an executive summary of the pack of materials that has been assembled about the project, to be shared with participating local authorities and others in late January, but it may serve as a helpful introduction to them.

## section one: what the project is, what it is for and how it is working

Narrowing the Gap is a two-year research and development project which is funded by the 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 between vulnerable and excluded children and the rest, against a context of improving outcomes for all. The focus of the project is on 3–13s but with some consideration of the issues for under-3s and for 14–19s.

On completion, the project should deliver the following outputs:

- 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.

The DCSF has also said it wants the project to inform the work of the Centre for Excellence in Children's and Youth Services, due to be operational by mid 2008.

## what is meant by 'narrowing the gap'?

The term 'gap', in this context, means the difference/deficit between the outcomes for a specific group and the outcomes for the whole range of children and young people of which the group forms a part.

'Narrowing the gap', and 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/deficits in outcomes between these groups and children and young people as a whole – whilst improving outcomes for all.

The outcomes in question are those identified in *Every Child Matters*: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being. Whilst there is a major focus on educational attainment (enjoying and achieving) for which we make no apology, improving attainment depends a great deal on the other four and, in turn, contributes greatly to them.

## the groups of children on whom the project is concentrating

It is clear from practice and research that some groups of children are more likely to fall behind than others: these are set out overleaf 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:

- children from poorer socio-economic groups (including white 'working class' boys)
- children in care
- children with disabilities
- children with SEN
- 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.

#### the five themes on which the project is working

The project has five themes (or key lines of enquiry), all of which are deliberately intensely practical. These themes were chosen as convenient routes into the complex set of issues that arise in this area and were selected for their clear policy and practice significance – they are all being actively discussed and debated in the sector at present.

These themes are:

- 1 how to create and sustain the right links between Children's Centres, schools and other children's services

- 2 how to engage and support parents and carers in helping their children to succeed

- 3 how best to use the new systems and processes brought into being by ECM to orientate services more to prevention and early intervention (*being explored now in year one: June 2007–June 2008*)

- 4 how to strengthen and align local leadership and governance arrangements (both professional and political)

- 5 how to strengthen systems for developing local leaders to deliver improved services based on an understanding of what works (*will be explored in year two: July 2008–June 2009*).

#### who is actively involved in the project

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), Barbara Hearn (deputy chief executive, NCB) 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 oversees the general direction of the project. An extensive programme network of organisations from across the children's sector is providing further help and encouragement.

#### the distinctive features of the Narrowing the Gap project approach

There are many excellent research projects and improvement programmes under way in children's services at present, but Narrowing the Gap's approach is distinctive in three respects:

- because 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.

- because it focuses firmly on using the outputs of all the activities being undertaken to answer some simple but difficult 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', and coming up, we hope, with a series of evidence-based mechanisms for narrowing the gap that councils and their partners can adapt to the circumstances of their areas and the needs of their populations.
- because 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.

## section two: where the project has got to

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

Since it began in June 2007:

The core team, wider working group, programme board and programme network have all been established and are fully operational.

The project's plan, objectives and scope, methodology, outputs and communications strategy have all been agreed.

An analysis of data, and a literature and research review have been commissioned from NFER and have been produced, plus summaries of each of them.

A series of papers (called 'templates' in this project) have been created by the members of the core team which set out what are accepted to be the critical building blocks for narrowing the gap, based on the professional judgement of practitioners and organisations, and also now informed by the NFER reviews.

There are five of these templates and they are on 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 effectively set out what is needed at every level of the system, locally, to narrow the gap.

Once the templates were complete a series of hypotheses 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 (see page two), by drawing out the factors that appear to be commonalities across all the templates.

These hypotheses, called 'golden threads' in this project, have been 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.

That's the next stage in the project, which is about to begin:

- to reality check the 'golden threads' with Children's Trusts
- to give them the chance to amend and add to them
- and crucially, to 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.

When the project was designed we anticipated that about 25–30 councils would work on it. DCSF and LGA wrote jointly to every council, inviting them to participate. In the event, 96 accepted the invitation and are now involved, thanks in large part to DCSF agreeing to provide some additional funding to enable them to work together in regional groupings, with the support of children's services colleagues from the government offices for the regions.

These 96 councils constitute something of a critical mass and increase the chances of Narrowing the Gap making a national difference. It is notable that they include all the London authorities; the directors of children's services in these councils have

agreed to work together on Narrowing the Gap as a joint, pan-London project.

**the Narrowing the Gap hypotheses, or 'golden threads' that will form the focus for the next stage of the project with Children's Trusts**

The ten hypotheses, or golden threads, are as follows:

- creating a culture of high aspirations and giving children and parents access to a trusted adult
- working in real partnership with parents and families and building on their strengths
- 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
- 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
- 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
- taking active steps to make extended services available to all disadvantaged or vulnerable children – within and beyond the school
- deepening the integration of services, systems and processes
- reshaping the workforce and ensuring it is appropriately trained, supported and celebrated
- 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

- 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.

It is important to note that the paper setting out the hypotheses makes clear that the evidence is that they have to be taken together, applied universally and pursued relentlessly 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.

### section three: what can be learned from the Narrowing the Gap project so far

It is important to recognise that this is still 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.

#### lessons for policy and messages for government

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 – eg the focus on prevention and early intervention, and the prioritisation of support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children in their early years. This may not be surprising but it is reassuring nonetheless!

The importance of 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 DCSF and the children's plan as a springboard.

As the project has developed over the last six months the role of the school and the need for it to be linked closely to other services as a critical means of improving outcomes for children and narrowing the gap has become increasingly pronounced. In this, it reflects and reinforces the contents of the children's plan (which the project also informed). However, surveys of head teachers, particularly in secondary schools, suggest we have so far failed to secure their full buy-in to this idea of the role of the school, no doubt for a number of reasons. If the gap is to be narrowed everywhere, the notion of the school as a community asset and all that implies, must be driven through.

Narrowing the gap requires major changes in a number of respects at local level so strong local leadership is required. This isn't a task that can be left to directors of children's services alone; members also have crucial roles to play and must be brought on board.

The data analysis reveals some very major gaps in the data currently available in this area. These gaps have been drawn to the attention of the relevant teams of officials in DCSF.

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 – eg Black African Caribbean children and children in care – are ones on whom there has been a clear focus of policy and resources, nationally and locally. This project confirms again that the challenge of narrowing the gap for white working class boys is very considerable.

The importance of building children's resilience and non-cognitive skills as an essential means of narrowing the gap comes through over and over again. It isn't 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. The forthcoming child health strategy is an important opportunity to make progress in this respect.

The templates are a potentially rich source of information and knowledge for policy officials in DCSF. For example, those working on children in care should find it useful to go through all five of them, picking out the specific implications for these children at every level of the system, and using the results as a 'checklist' for their current policies and delivery ideas, and a means of informing the Implementation Plan for Care Matters.

The positive response from councils to the invitation to participate in the project is notable, particularly since no money was offered in return. This strong take up may have been for a number of reasons, but among them is almost certainly the fact that they liked the broadly collaborative approach – something for DCSF to build on for the future.

#### lessons for practice and messages for Children's Trusts

The templates that have been produced are as rich a potential source of insight and knowledge for staff in Children's Trusts as they are for policy officials in DCSF. 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 higher 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, are simple 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.

#### section four: next steps

Thanks to additional financial support from DCSF it is proposed we work with all directors of children's services of the 96 participating councils in two meetings arranged for the 28 and 31 January; and to engage a cross section of service staff and key partners in 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 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; at least one full day national conference to disseminate findings in June; and a final digest of 'effective practice' in July 2008.

In addition, an interactive website and network is being set up through IDeA. This will allow participating local authorities to communicate with each other and with other children's organisations in order to share effective practice, models and materials.

Communities of interest have been established to support practice in narrowing the gap across the public, voluntary and private sectors.

The digest of effective practice that is to be produced will signpost local authorities and others to the more detailed work being undertaken by organisations such as the TDA, NCSL, GTC, CWDC, NAPP, SCIE and others.

A call for evidence will be advertised by the end of January through the mainstream and specialist newspapers and journals. This will seek examples of effective, evidence based practice from any organisation, service or group. This will run between January and April. A hearing will be held in the House of Lords on the 17 April 2008, chaired by Baroness Estelle Morris.

A final comprehensive review of regional, local and sensitive data sets and a mapping of all on-going research being conducted by university departments and others will also be completed by February, commissioned from NFER.

Between June 2008 and March 2009 the final two themes will be worked on, using the same methodology as is being 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 (ie 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 March 2009.

## section five: 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. As the project progresses it will be important to consider 'scaleability' – to ensure that promising approaches can be 'scaled up' from local, to regional, to national.

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 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 we are broadly heading in the right direction. Second, some elements do come through more strongly than might have been expected – eg 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. And finally, the project's inclusive methodology should help to generate the conditions which make it more likely that we will make progress, reinforcing, for example, the efforts DCSF is making at a national level.

In general, the work of the project to date has concentrated on policy, practice and research, not on resources – particularly financial resources. However, some financial pressures are already coming through (eg as a barrier to the sustainability of early years provision in poor areas) and it is foreseeable that as the project progresses and looks more closely at delivery in localities, these will become more prominent. It will be important for the significance of these to be fully registered and understood but they mustn't act as a block to progress for the project overall.

More information about the Narrowing the Gap project is available from [daniel.mason@lga.gov.uk](mailto:daniel.mason@lga.gov.uk).

A further briefing paper will be produced in July 2008.

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